

# I'd Build You a World

by LJ9

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Summary: Modern AU: The DunBrochs host a Highland games at the castle every summer, and Stoick drags Hiccup down for a visit.

## 1. Chapter 1

I don't own any of the major characters, who belong to Disney Pixar and Dreamworks, or any of the many other things referenced here.

Title from "Lady Percy" by King Charles, the song I listened to over 127 times in the commission of this fic.

Based on FF. net's guidelines, it's possible that this should be rated M for its bad words (in two languages!) and innuendo. But I really don't believe it's an M and have rated it as T-if it was a movie it'd definitely just be PG-13, not R. Just be aware as you proceed.

AU so hard, and not a strict point-to-point AU. As usual, there are snippets of real-world details, but I've also willfully ignored some real-world details as well. Since I know not everybody's been to a Highland games before, I'll do my best to include notes at the end of each chapter explaining some of the things I've described.

Don't expect much plot and this'll go a lot better for all of us.

This seriously wouldn't have happened without Mel(ibells). She made the cover picture for me like a month ago, yelled back at me with good ideas, and encouraged me when I was ready to give up. So if you like this, go thank her (melibells here/melifair on tumblr). If you don't like it, it was all me.

\* \* \*

><p>She hopped around the room, holding the mobile to her ear with her shoulder while she tried to pull on a boot.<p>

"When are you coming home, lass?"

"Soon, Dad," she said. "I've work tonight; maybe the day after tomorrow?"

Her mum said the same thing she always did whenever Merida mentioned work: clucked disapprovingly and asked why she had to work in a pub of all places. Merida explained as she always did. "It's a decent place, and the customers are mostly tourists from the hostel. They're nice because they're on holiday. Would you rather I worked at a local full of neds?"

"I'd rather you didn't work in a pub at all."

"You agreed that if my grades were good I could get a job," she reminded her, sing-song, and her mother sighed.

"Yes, but I thought you might find a job working at a shop, or a library." Something ladylike, clean and charitable and safe, was what she meant. Pouring drinks for backpackers certainly wasn't any of those things.

She heard her dad chuckle on the other end. "Elinor, love, why would you have ever thought that of our daughter?"

"That's what I'd like to know." And now, if she didn't hurry, she'd be late for her unladylike but highly enjoyable job. "Mum, Dad, I've got to go. I'll see you soon."

"Be careful, dear."

"I will. Love you, Mum. Love you, Dad."

"You too, lass."

"Love to the boys. Bye."

Truth be told, she wouldn't mind going home, and not just to use a free washing machine. The city was filling up with people for the summer, and the tourists coming in during the hottest months were a wilder breed than the ones who braved Edinburgh at other times of the year. Back home she'd have a chance to rest, enjoy the fresh air outside the city—she loved the capital, but it wasn't called Auld Reekie for no reason—ride Angus, and sleep in her own bed. She'd never realized how wonderful her bed was until the first time she'd gone home at winter holidays and fallen back into its familiar embrace for so long that her mother had thought she'd died during the night.

The pub wasn't too crowded tonight. A few of the regulars were there and she greeted them by name as she slipped behind the bar. As she tied her apron on she heard a familiar voice say, "Why, if it isn't the princess."

"Not a princess, Jamie," she reminded him. And if he called her lady next, she wouldn't hesitate to make it known that his father was a lord as well. Jamie Macintosh leaned against the bar and grinned at

her in what he almost certainly thought was a suave manner. She stared back, unimpressed. "Can I get you anything?"

"Stella." He was wearing a tight black t-shirt—did he own anything else?—and his tattoos peeked out beneath the sleeves as he ran one hand through his dark hair. Across the bar a trio of girls watched him, giggling amongst themselves.

"Those girls are staring at you," she said, pushing the pint across to him, though why she should be doing him any favors was a mystery. "Three twenty-five." She saw him glance over her head into the mirror that backed the bar and smirk before reaching into his back pocket for his wallet. The girls' eyes followed his hand to his arse and they giggled anew, just as he hoped and she knew they would. She managed to make change without rolling her eyes at the ovine predictability of the human race; Jamie ignored the change and took his pint, sipping it as he turned casually. One of the girls waved a little before her friends slapped her hand down, but that was more than the encouragement he needed to saunter over to them and introduce himself.

If nothing else, working there had brought a new appreciation of humanity's stupidity and variety into her life. Every week she saw the same bad decisions being made, the same idealistic backpackers tramp through the door; but she also got to meet people from all over the world, many of whom were perfectly nice, if occasionally a little naive and/or ignorant about her country. Like the girls that Jamie was chatting to: they were probably American, and probably thought that he was the greatest thing they'd ever seen because of his long hair and tattoos and tight jeans and accent. It was always the accent that got them in the end. Merida wouldn't complain, though; if they went home and told their friends about the (in their opinion) hot Scottish guy who'd flirted with them in the Falconer, it was free advertisement for the pub. And of course some of the tourists weren't too bad themselves, and maybe one or two of them even went home and told their friends about the ginger-haired barmaid who'd served them. She didn't really flirt with any of the customers, but it never hurt to be friendly, especially to the ones who weren't sure if they were supposed to leave a tip or not.

She pulled pints, dispensed crisps, laughed with some of the regulars, washed glasses, and hummed along with the music until her shift was over. Then it was off with her apron and into the back to grab her things before she left. "I'm off," she told the manager, peering around the door into the cramped office.

"Aye, and you're off back home, too?"

"Yeah."

"Can't say I blame you." He arched his back, cracking it loudly. "I'd rather be swanning around a castle in the countryside than stuck in this madhouse of a city myself."

She scoffed. "Have I ever swanned anywhere in my life?" She helped with all of the tasks around the pub, all without a bit of swanning.

"Don't know," he said, deadpan, "I've never seen you in your natural environment."

"Piss off," she said cheerfully. "I'll see you later."

"See yous," he said as she walked out.

Jamie was standing alone on the sidewalk outside. She narrowed her eyes; he hadn't been waiting for her, had he? Maybe she could sneak past without him noticing her.

That was his cue to hail her, obnoxiously as usual. "Where are your new fans?" she asked.

He gave a mocking smile. "One of them drank a bit more than she could handle and her friends took her back."

"So what're you hanging around for?" She knew she shouldn't sound so hostile. Her mum always insisted that he wasn't as terrible as Merida made him out to be, and she knew that was probably true. It was just so hard to deal with him sometimes, him thinking he was so great and everyone ought to feel privileged to be in his presence.

"I walked them to the hostel and I was just heading home myself. Want me to walk you home as well?"

Not especially, she thought, but it was safer than the alternative. Merida was independent and confident that she could take care of herself, but she wasn't so stupid to think that walking home alone from a pub at night in the city was perfectly safe. And Jamie Macintosh ranked low on the list of people who might do her harm. Try her patience, certainly, and get on her final nerve, but never actually threaten her. Their fathers had been acquainted too long, and he'd been afraid of her dad when they'd been younger. She nodded shortly and they started to walk. Merida crossed her arms tightly just to make sure she didn't send any encouraging signals.

"Are you going home soon?"

"Day after tomorrow."

He nodded. "I'll see you there, then."

"You're coming?" she asked, then immediately frowned. Of course he'd be there, him and his parents and the MacGuffins and the Dingwalls. They'd all be there, and her mum would encourage her to socialize with the lads while their dads talked business and politics and golf and she'd do her best not to throw herself off the tower.

He shot her a look. "D'you think my dad would miss the DunBroch games and the chance to take the piss out of old Dingwall?"

"Of course not," she sighed wearily. Because heaven forbid the other lords actually act like grownups. Outside her building Jamie waited at the bottom of the steps as she climbed to the front door. Merida knew she should thank him for walking her home, but her lips clamped shut as she fit the key in the lock.

It didn't bother him. "See you soon, princess," he said, and she waved, resisting the urge to turn it into a ruder gesture the minute his back was turned.

She locked the door behind her and then dropped her forehead against it, groaning. Apparently it was too much to ask the universe to let her enjoy time at home with just her family; she'd also have clan members, hordes of tourists, and the lords, who, for some unfathomable reason, wanted their charming sons to marry her, to deal with. There was only one way to prepare for the upcoming week, so she fell face-first onto her bed and slept.

\* \* \*

><p>He was totally aware that he sounded like a petulant four-year-old, but he asked anyway. "Do we have to go, Dad?"<p>

If anything, his dad was more patient with 20-year-old him than he had been with four-year-old Hiccup. He doubted that he was any less annoying now than he'd been then, so maybe his dad had mellowed. "Yes, son. It's family."

"We hardly know them! Gobber's more family than those guys."

Stoick could hardly argue with thatâ€"his best friend was like a brother to him, and had arguably helped raise Hiccup (arguably because Hiccup wasn't sure Gobber wanted any credit, or blame, for how he'd turned out so far).

"Family is important."

"Right. That must be why we get Christmas cards from them all the time."

He wished his mom were there. Maybe she'd be able to convince Stoick that they didn't have to go. "I don't see why I have to go, though."

"Because it's family." Dad sounded like a broken record. "It's our heritage. Besides, do you have something better to do?"

Without his dad there, he could get a truly epic amount of game play in. He couldn't very well say that, though; 'Leave me here with my video games' just wouldn't fly.

"You used to love going to the gathering. What happened?"

Hiccup tried not to sigh. "Dad, that was like, nine years ago. Then everybody else went through a growth spurt and started being able to toss cabers one-handed and suddenly none of them wanted to associate with the tiny skinny geek for some reason."

His dad didn't even try to deny it. Then again, his dad had probably come out of the womb able to flip telephone poles, and couldn't possibly understand what it was like to be a late bloomer. "Aren't geeks cool now?"

"In theory, yes. In the real world, or, alternately, a world where people dance over swords and men throw huge weights over their heads, not so much."

Stoick glanced over at him just for a moment before turning his attention back to the laundry. "Come on, Hiccup. Things have changed."

Things have changed was probably the understatement of the century. The last time they'd gone to the games he'd had two standard-issue legs. Okay, after the initial shock had worn off he'd kind of come to appreciate his prosthetic, but it still led to some social awkwardness, on top of his natural social awkwardness. After the crash he'd been a minor local celebrity for a minute—"saving innocent bystanders from almost certain death seemed to have that effect, but there'd been nothing else he could have done. He'd told the reporters that he'd just done what his dad would have, leaving out the part where Hiccup's doing nothing would have disgraced Dad and his club. If he'd done that he would have been better off dying in the explosion. As it was he lived, his dad was made proud, and he got a shiny new lower leg.

When he'd graduated he'd thought he wanted to book it out of Berk as soon as he could, to study anywhere he wasn't the hero or the cripple or the manager's son, but it was harder than he expected to leave his dad and especially Toothless. Dad hadn't been a fan of the stray dog at first and he still tended to call him the Black Beast of Berk, but the dog had been the only thing that had gotten Hiccup through the long, endlessly frustrating hours of physical therapy and the dark times when he wished he had gone ahead and died and saved everyone the trouble. Now his dad wanted him to go see distant family who'd ask nosy personal questions under the guise of concern. The accident had done wonders for their relationship; surely Stoick could work out why he didn't want to deal with all the questions again.

But his dad, who was clearly oblivious to the way the real world functioned, said, "It'll be fun. You can get some fresh air and meet people your own age. In the flesh. Maybe you'll even meet some girls."

Hiccup dropped his face in his hands. "Ugh, Dad." After he'd gotten out of the hospital some of the club's female fans had taken a shine to him. At first the attention had flustered and confused him; he'd never had pretty, popular girls acknowledge him before, let alone pay him attention and buy him coffee. It didn't last long before most of them had lost interest when they realized that he really was just a weird kid and not a big hero. Except for Astrid. She'd actually liked him more over time instead of the other way around; they'd gotten along really well. Surprisingly well—"so well that he'd been holding out hope that he'd soon join Augustus Waters in the ranks of one-legged teenage non-virgins when Stoick had again turned down her application for a trial with the team. Then she'd dumped him when he didn't pick a fight with his father on her behalf.

"I thought you said you could fight your own battles," he'd protested.

"Oh, I can!" She'd crossed her arms under her chest and that had totally not helped the situation at all. "It'd just be nice to have your support."

"You do! I totally support you, you know that. But I have a hard enough time with my dad without finding something else to disagree with him about."

That hadn't been good enough. She'd shaken her head. "I can't see you anymore. Actually, I can't see your dad anymore, and you would just

remind me of him."

Funny how he'd been wanting that for so long, and now that he heard it it meant that he'd lost something he cared about. He had been heartbroken, and on top of everything else, he felt like he'd let John Green down.

Now Hiccup stared up at his dad incredulously. "I don't get why you think girls would like me more when they can actually see me."

And again Stoick didn't bother to disagree. Just the normal show of confidence in his son.

"Who's going to take care of Toothless? We can't bring him with us." Ha. He crossed his arms over his chest. Take that, Dad.

"Gobber's already said he'll keep him."

There had to be some other reason he couldn't go. Maybe he could break his prosthetic. No, that was a terrible idea. His dad would kill him and then drag him along anyway just to make a point.

Then his dad played his ace. "It's at the castle, you know. Think of how much more you'll appreciate it now that you've had a few architecture classes. They give tours, and you could do some drawings." He should've known Dad would fight dirty eventually.

Of all that he remembered of the past gatherings, the castle was always there in sharp detail: the thick walls, the gate with spiked portcullis, the round, slope-roofed tower rising above it all. There was no way he could say no to the chance to see it again.

Hiccup knew by his face that his dad could tell he'd given up. At least he didn't gloat about it; all he said was "Don't forget to pack some nice things, too."

"Fine," he grumbled as Stoick walked away. "But I'm not gonna wear a skirt."

\* \* \*

><p>Even through the rain that streaked the windows she could make out her dad, wearing shorts despite the wet and standing under the overhang, his gaze scanning the train. She burst out of the doors the second they opened. "Dad!"<p>

His face lit up as he turned and saw her rushing toward him. "There she is! Hello, darling."

"Hi, Dad."

He cuddled her close. "It's good to see you, love."

"You, too."

He released her, manhandled the pack from her shoulders, and picked up her duffel bag. "Is this all?" The bags looked small in his hands as they walked toward the carpark.

"It should be more than enough, unless you've sold all the things I

left in my room."

"I \_told\_ your mum we should've not just given them all away." Merida laughed and her dad grinned.

"Can I drive?" she asked eagerly as he unlocked the mud-splashed Rover. Driving was one of the things she missed most when she was in Edinburgh. In a few minutes behind the wheel she'd find herself again, things she hadn't known were off-center clicking back into place.

But if there was one thing her dad could deny her, it was the keys. "Indeed you cannot. You've had a long journey, you've probably not slept enough recently, and it's raining. Maybe tomorrow." She pouted at him and he ignored her as he climbed in. She also knew from experience that he would drive away and leave her standing there, so she got in.

"Are the boys home yet?" she asked, buckling her seatbelt.

Dad shook his head. "They should arrive tomorrow."

"And they've not been sent down yet?" Merida whistled in disbelief. "This must be a record."

He had to defend his sons. "Ah, now, they're maturing. Maybe not as fast as some peopleâ€" He poked a finger into her side and she giggled. "â€"but they're getting there. And it is a military school, after all."

They chatted about work and school and the preparations for the games as he drove. Talking on the phone wasn't the same as being there with her dad as his laughter shook the car.

The rain had let up by the time they rolled across the bridge. Merida stared up at the building as she climbed down from the passenger seat. She'd never really thought of it as a castle, not really; it was just their home, though she'd known for years that other people didn't live in such grand buildings. She also knew how lucky they were to still have their clan's ancestral seat. The economy hadn't been so kind to everyone.

The air was cooler now, smelling of wet earth and the loch just beyond the walls. Her mum was standing at the door, looking as elegant as ever with her long dark hair hanging loose down her back. She held out her arms. "Merida!"

She grinned. No one else said her name quite the way her mother did. "Hi, Mum."

Elinor held her daughter at arm's length to take a good look at her. She worried too much, which Merida knew was a common problem among parents, especially those whose firstborn had moved away to the big city. Mum studied her for a moment, as if trying to see if anything had changed about her face, and then pulled her into a hug. "I'm glad you're home," she said into Merida's hair.

She was glad to be home. "You just want me for the free labor," she teased. Her mum tickled her in retaliation and she squirmed and giggled in her grasp. Then Fergus wrapped his arms around both of



them.

"What a lucky man I am, with my two beautiful ladies." He squeezed them tight and dropped kisses on both of their heads before letting go and picking up Merida's bags again, carrying them into the hall. Elinor looped her arm through her Merida's and they walked into the house together.

At dinner that night, as she passed a bowl of broccoli to Fergus, Elinor remarked, "Clarissa Macintosh said you saw young Jamie recently."

Merida groaned. Lady Clarissa was a relentlessly gossiping biddy who was dead certain that Merida was completely in love with Jamie and that it was only a matter of time before they got married. She gave her mum a disgusted look. "He came into the pub and ordered a beer from me and then flirted with some tourists so hard that one of them got sick." Her dad snorted.

"Honestly, Merida, it's not as though I encourage any of this." Her mum shook her head. "You know how I feel about Clarissa." She felt about Clarissa the same way Merida felt about her son. The only difference was that Lady Elinor was able to hide her personal feelings and act cordially toward people she didn't much care for.

"I know, Mum," she sighed. She wished the other lords weren't coming. Suddenly she froze. "We're not doing the big dinner thing, are we?" \_Please, no\_. Anything but that.

"You know very well we are." Her dad didn't sound any more enthusiastic about it than she felt. The dinner was formal, which meant that he'd have to wear his Prince Charlie jacket and a bowtie and all with his kilt, a far cry from the football top and cargo shorts he was currently wearing. Merida didn't mind dressing up, but the dressing up wasn't the problem for her. The problem was the company she'd be forced to keep.

"It's traditional," Elinor said briskly. "You'll all be there and on your best behavior and I'll hear no whining."

"That's what you think," Merida muttered under her breath. When her mum shot her a sharp look she smiled innocently.

Fergus let her drive to pick up the boys at the station just after lunch the next day. It was fine and clear, and workers were already setting up the carpark outside the castle grounds. The household staff had been cleaning the interior of the castle bit by bit, but now, with only a few days left until the opening chieftains' dinner on Thursday night and the knowledge that the triplets were coming home, a hint of franticness crept into their efforts.

"Merde!" Harris cried as he jumped off the train, closely followed by his brothers. For a moment she imagined having brothers who hadn't discovered that her name bore a slight resemblance to a French swear word. Then she shook her head. That'd be no fun at all. The boys gave her brief hugs and she kissed them overenthusiastically, delighted to have the chance to embarrass them again.

They chucked their bags into the back and clambered in, after only a

momentary disagreement about who got to ride up front, worked out through some secret triplet code. It was Hamish who won. "Is Mum going crazy yet?"

"Not quite." She reversed carefully and headed out of the carpark toward the road home. "Maudie is, though."

"Maudie always is," Hubert scoffed. How the housekeeper had survived the boys' childhood was a source of mystery to all of them; Dad had more than once suggested that they give her a nice pension and let her go, for the sake of her nerves, but for some unknown reason she'd stuck around.

"Can we get ice cream before we go home?" Hamish asked.

She pretended to think about it for a minute. "I suppose so," she sighed in mock-weariness, though there'd never been much of a chance that she'd say no and they all knew it. "I hope you know that the driver never has to pay for her own ice cream."

They'd agree to almost anything for sweets, so swindling them out of a cone was no problem. Merida licked her scoops of strawberry and peach and listened to the boys tell stories of nearly getting caught out of their rooms after curfew and leading a raid on the kitchens to liberate biscuits. They'd only actually gotten kicked out of the one school; the other two had each declined to issue them an invitation to return for a second year. They weren't bad boys, not really. They were mischievous and didn't always think things through, but they never meant any real harm. And they always worked together, which meant that instead of any blame being spread among three unrelated culprits, it was heaped collectively on the DunBroch boys, and that made them look more troublesome. Merida didn't worry about them, though. They were bright boys, and soon enough their maturity level would catch up with their energy level and they'd be right as rain. And now that they were here, they'd keep Mum and Dad and Maudie busy, and she'd be free to do what she wanted.

\* \* \*

><p>Being on the plane meant it was too late to avoid it, unless he wanted to do something that would get him arrested. He buckled his seatbelt and asked, "Where are we staying on this grand adventure, anyway?"<p>

One of the advantages of traveling with someone the size of his dad was that business class was the only option, and luckily they could afford it. The flight was only a few hours long, anyway; when they arrived in Aberdeen they'd pick up their rental car for the drive to DunBroch, and wherever they were staying.

"With the Jorgensons, at their vacation home."

"What? No!" This was terrible news. "Because number one, Jorgenson isn't even a Scottish name, and number two, that guy hates me."

"Haddock isn't the most Scottish of names, either, but here we are. Besides, Snotlout doesn't hate you, and nor does Spitelout. Snotlout's going to be competing in the games."

"Of course he is," Hiccup muttered. "Just another thing he can be better than me at."

"It's kind of them to allow us to stay with them. Try to remember that."

They were distant cousins, somehowâ€”Stoick's family thing again. Hiccup didn't believe that Snotlout had the capacity to be kind, but then again, their staying with the Jorgensons couldn't have been Snotlout's choice. The last time they'd seen each other he'd already been taller and broader than Hiccup, with a permanent sneer on his face. Hiccup couldn't imagine the years had made him any smarter or more tolerant than the guy who'd given him wedgies and made fun of his haircut. With any luck Snotlout would be so busy preparing for the competition that he wouldn't have time to harass Hiccup.

At least he had his sketchbook. If he got nothing else out of this trip, at least he'd be able to see the castle again, and get some good studies of it. And his dad would be happy. He'd survived growing up in Berk; he could survive this weekend.

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><p><strong>Notes:<strong>

ned = juvenile delinquent-type person

football = what most of the world thinks of as football, i.e., not American football

merde = "crap"/"shit" in French

I know DunBroch wouldn't necessarily be the family's last name and Haddock wouldn't be Stoick's in actual real Viking nomenclature. It was just easier to use the names we all already know.

Toothless would be the best dog ever. I'm not sorry for making him one here.

Scottish/Highland games = like the gathering in "Brave." I've never been to one in Scotland, but I've been to several in the US.

Schedules and attractions vary; some have sheepdog trials or demonstrations, some have historical and/or military reenactments, some have a ceilidh on Friday night and/or a Celtic rock concert on Saturday night. They all have pipe bands, Highland dancing, lots of tartans, and the throwing of heavy things:

>-caber = a large log that participants attempt to flip end over end; closest to 12 o'clock wins the most points<br>-sheaf toss = athletes use a large pitchfork to throw a burlap bag of straw weighing about 16 pounds (7 kilos) over a bar; whoever throws it the highest in the fewest attempts wins

>-weight for heightweight over the bar = throwing a weight, from 28 up to 56 pounds, backwards over a bar

>-also stone putthrow (like regular shotput but with a heavier stone, not a smooth ball) and hammer throw (like regular hammer but on a stick instead of a chain and thrown from a standing position); sometimes also wrestling and races

Athletes must wear kilts...and shorts underneath.

## 2. Chapter 2

Dang, y'all! Thank you for all the favorites and follows already. I hope you guys continue to enjoy it.

\* \* \*

><p>The games hadn't even started yet and already people were driving her crazy. She'd innocently wandered through the great hall, looking for some breakfast, and had ended up right in the middle of a tour group. Why they were giving tours today was beyond her; maybe it was because the hall looked especially impressive, all set for the dinner as it was, silver and linen and crystal laid out on the big table. If only the volunteer tour guide hadn't pointed her out, everything would have been fine; she'd have been able to have some breakfast and take Angus out for a leisurely ride before she had to get ready. As it was he'd said, "And here's one of the owners of the castle, the Lady Merida," and she'd been surrounded by fawning foreigners, asking too many questions, about her hair and being a lady and the castle, enough for more than one lifetime. Eventually she'd managed to slip away through one of the hallways that wasn't included on the tour, and now Merida sat at the top of the tower, lying back against the roof with her face tipped up to the sun. From this height everything was quiet and peaceful, and she could pretend that she wasn't already being run out of her home by hordes of visitors. She'd even tied an old bandana over her head so her hair wouldn't stand out quite so much if anyone was looking from the courtyard and she'd silenced her mobile. If they wanted her, they'd have to search for her. Just for a few minutes of peace.<p>

She was so relaxed that she didn't notice the doors creaking open or the footsteps shuffling over the stones. A shadow fell over her face and she started, eyes wide. The sun was behind whoever it was, meaning she couldn't make out the person's features, but it was easy enough to tell that it wasn't anyone in her family. Which meant that it wasn't anyone who should have been on the tower. She scrabbled up, hands slipping against the stones. When she made it to her feet she snapped, "Who are you?"

The voice startled Hiccup. "Whoa!" There was a girl there, wearing capris and a tank top with a bandana over violently red hair. She looked suspicious and tense, and he reverted to his default mode: nervous babbling. "I'm notâ€"I didn't knowâ€"what are you doing up here?"

She jammed her fists into her hips. "I live here, laddie. What are you doing here?" He was foreign, just what she didn't need. She especially didn't need him to make some crack about her living on the top of the tower. She might just tip him over the side if he did.

Luckily for him, he didn't, though his eyes widened. "You live here? That's amazing!" If she lived here, she must know all about it. He had lots of questions and he launched into them without preamble. "So it seems pretty clear that this tower and the other one are Romanesque, but how much of it has been reconstructed? The stairs seemed pretty solid on the way up. And, I gotta be honest, I don't know how long it took the Romanesque to filter up to this part of the world, y'know? Most of the stuff I've read on it centers on the

continent, andâ€¦" He trailed off at the confused look on her face.

This was not at all what she'd expected. "Who are you?" she repeated wonderingly.

"Oh." He took a step back and raised one hand to rub the back of his neck. "Um, my name's Hiccup."

"Really?" She hadn't meant to say that out loud. He just nodded, though, looking like he was used to it.

"Look, I know I'm probably not supposed to be up here, but we're here for the games and I came over to take the tour of the castle before it got too crowded and I got a little distracted and..."

"And just happened to end up at the top of the great tower?"

He shrugged, smiling sheepishly. "I wanted to see where the stairs went."

His curiosity was like an addiction. Whenever he tried to ignore it, it just came back worse. \_What if you don't ever find out where those stairs go? What if there's a fantastic treasure just behind those doors, waiting for the right person to open them? What happens if you take the DVD player apart? \_

\_What's the worst that could happen?\_ he always tried to ask himself, to break the tractor-beam pull, and the answer was always the same: \_You \_\*\*won't know\*\*\_, and you'll know that you won't know for the rest of your life. \_That was the risk he wasn't willing to take.

It'd gotten him in trouble before, it had now, and it would again in the future. The girl's expression was less annoyed now, but it was obviously time for him to get back. "Sorry. I should probably go now."

She nodded shortly. "Think you can find your way back alright?"

"Um." He hadn't been paying good attention on the way up, meandering through dim corridors and inspecting the joinery until he hit the stairs. "Sure. Of course. No problem." He felt like an idiot as she raised an eyebrow.

"Right. Go down past the great hallâ€¦that entrance \_should\_ be locked. When you hit the base of the tower, there's a door that leads into a storeroom, with a set of steps in the corner. It'll be dark, so mind where you're going. Under the steps there's a little door. There's a slot on the wall to the right at about chest height; that's where the key is."

"Wait, are you serious?" he interrupted. This sounded like some kind of practical joke. He hoped he had cell service on this quest; otherwise they might never find his body.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "I had to learn how to sneak out of this place. Unless the door to the great hall is unlocked, which it shouldn't be, this is the easiest way."

"There's a harder way?" He sounded doubtful. Of course, she had the key to the door into the great hall in her pocket, but he didn't know that, or need to. It wasn't her job to escort lost boys around her house while she was trying to hide out.

"Unlock the door and don't forget to put the key back before you go. There are steps going downâ€”have you got a flashlight?"

"Cell phone," he said, patting his pocket.

"If you trip and fall and die the clan cannot be legally held responsible, so don't," she counseled. "It might be wet down there, too."

"Please tell me you're not sending me through the drains," he begged. "I wanted to see more of the castle, but not this way."

She declined to answer, as it was his own fault. Anyway, the garderobes hadn't been used in centuries. Instead she looked him up and down. He was skinnyâ€”no, not exactly skinny; he was wiry, and just a bit taller than she was. The eyes that watched her expectantly and not a little warily were wide and a green she'd never seen on a real person before. His shoulders were the widest part of him and even they weren't that broad, so he ought to fit through fine. "Push the grate out, and make sure you replace it when you're out. You'll come out just about there." She leaned over the parapet and pointed at a spot beyond the outer wall. "Try not to fall into the loch while you're at it."

"I'll do my best," he promised dryly. She chuckled and he gave her a half smile. It was kind of lovely, actually, and for a second she felt guilty about not just taking him down herself.

Then she remembered that if she went downstairs her mother would catch her and make her be helpful and polite and social. No, thank you; he could find his own way. "You'll be fine. It's not as bad as it sounds."

"Great. Thanks. Uh, sorry for trespassing." He pulled up one of the doors and put a foot through before stopping and facing her again. "See you around?" He sounded hopeful, though he'd been shooting for coolly optimistic.

She shrugged nonchalantly, though a smile tugged at her lips. "I'll be around." See, that was what he was going for.

"And, y'know, on the off chance I die, who should my ghost blame my untimely demise on?"

She chuckled again. Couldn't fault him for being thorough. "Merida."

"Merida," he said contemplatively, cocking his head. "Just Merida? Because the paranormal investigators might need to know moreâ€”"

"They'll know it's me," she reassured him.

"Okay." He flashed the half smile again and then disappeared into the

tower, closing the door behind him. She'd look for him tomorrow at the games, she told herself, just to make sure. He'd be easy enough to find; there couldn't be too many guys called Hiccup around.

\* \* \*

><p>It was exactly as she'd described it. Hiccup moved as quietly as he could, expecting a door to be thrown open at any time and security to haul him out of the castle and return him to his father, who would frown down at him and sigh heavily. He'd prefer to brave the darkness than risk making his dad angry, especially so early in the trip. He snapped a few pictures with his phone, for reference; he didn't know when he'd need any references like this, but he didn't think he'd have the opportunity to take reference pictures like this again, so it couldn't hurt. As he unlocked the door and carefully replaced the key in its slot he thought about the girl. She'd seemed kind of cranky, though it was understandable why: if people were taking tours through his house and one of them ended up in the same place he'd gone for some privacy, he'd probably be cranky, too. When Astrid had been annoyed any attempt to make her less so had only had the opposite effect, but this Merida girl had laughed. If anything it meant that she probably wasn't likely to rat on him. And she was pretty, if a little intimidating. Maybe that was his type, he thought, stooping to go through the door. It'd be just his luck if it was.<p>

The hole to the outside was just big enough for him to shimmy through. He peered out, but there was no one around this side of the castle, so he crawled out quickly and heaved the iron grate back into place before standing. Act like you belong here, he told himself; Snotlout acted like he owned any place he went to and it worked for him, until he opened his mouth. Hiccup snapped a few more pictures before he wandered back around to the entrance where his dad was waiting.

"Where've you been?" Stoick asked.

"Just checking out the masonry." When in doubt, talk about construction. It worked with all kinds of people, not just his dad.

"Did you enjoy the tour?"

"Yeah. I still have lots of questions, though," he said, looking back at the tower, but there was no girl there.

\* \* \*

><p>It was possible she should have mentioned the intruder to someone, but it didn't seem that important. She'd handled the situation rather well, she thought. He wouldn't be likely to turn up somewhere he wasn't meant to be again. Anyway, he wasn't some kind of master of international espionage looking to steal the nonexistent riches of DunBroch. He was much too awkward to be a good spy. He was cute, but he was no James Bond.<p>

She managed to get Angus out for a short ride by laying a heavy guilt trip on the groom. "He'll be cooped up for the next three days, and that's just not fair. I know you'll walk him about and all, but he needs to run a bit."

"\_You\_ need to run a bit, you mean," the man grumbled, but kindly. Merida made a face at him as he handed over the reins.

She had to walk him all the way over the bridge and to the head of the trail into the forest; only then could she let him run. Angus was another thing that she both missed and didn't talk much about when she was down in Edinburgh. It was all just too stereotypical, being the daughter of a noble family who grew up in a castle and had a beloved horse. That was the one and only advantage of having people like Jamie around: they understood and didn't ask stupid questions. The last time someone had heard Merida's father was the clan chief, the girl had asked if her parents had arranged a marriage for her yet. \_Yet!\_ As if it was inevitable. She'd been rather proud of her answer: she'd smiled beatifically and said, "Next Beltane they'll consult with the chief druid, and then they'll know who I'm meant to marry." The girl had looked confused but nodded anyway.

If she'd had time she would have done some free climbing out at the Firefall. Instead she had to content herself with lying in the grass as Angus rolled nearby, the sun warm on her skin. She tried not to think of the dinner to come, or of the strange boy who'd interrupted her earlier attempt at quiet time and was interrupting it again. There was something different about him, and not just the prosthetic leg. Though she'd been annoyed to see him on the tower, he hadn't been annoying. That was more than she could say for most of the boys in her life. She didn't think she'd mind talking to him some more, especially not if she got to see that little smile again...

"Enough of that, ye daft girl," she scolded aloud. She pushed all thought out of her mind and snuggled down into the grass.

There were no tourists in sight when Angus trotted over the bridge and through the gate. Merida brushed him and made sure that he had plenty of water and food before she gave him one last pat. "Wish me luck," she sighed against his neck, and he whickered encouragingly.

A dress was hung on the door of her wardrobe when she emerged from the shower. It was plain, black and sleeveless, but she'd wear a sash of the DunBroch tartan to smarten it up. She pulled on the dress and put on her silver necklace with the knot of three bears; now she just had to deal with her hair.

"Wear it up, dear," Elinor said from the doorway, putting in a pearl earring. Merida made a face that her mother didn't see and pulled her hair into a high ponytail before turning to her mum with an innocent expression.

"Merida," she chided.

"Well, it's easy for you," Merida retorted. "You've not got the curse of the DunBrochs on your head." She let Mum pull the ponytail out and smooth her hair into a more refined twist, securing it with a vast number of pins.

"You've lovely hair, dear. And it suits you."

She smirked, tilting her chin up. "Totally out of control and impossible to ignore?"



"Exactly," Elinor said, turning her daughter around by the shoulders to smile at her. "And I wouldn't have you any other way." She secured the plaid around Merida's shoulder and tied the ends at her hip. Then she stood back and admired her handiwork.

Her mother looked pleased, her dark eyes soft. The two of them hadn't always gotten on; Elinor had thought her daughter was too wild, too much like her father, and Merida had thought that her mother was too strict, unwilling to even try to listen to her. But at moments like this, it was obvious that her mum loved her very much. "I am so glad you're here," Elinor said. "I've missed you."

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be," she said simply. No matter how much she whinged about things, it was true. If hordes were going to overrun DunBroch, even just hordes of well-meaning and paying visitors, she had to be there to protect it.

Best not to put it in those terms to her mum, though.

Elinor gave her a warm hug. "My bonny brave girl," she murmured, and Merida felt like she was five again, safe in her mum's embrace. Mum squeezed her one more time and then stepped back, smoothing her skirt. "Right, I suppose it's time. Would you fetch your brothers, please, while I see to your father?"

In their room, the boys were mostly dressed, though Harris was still putting on his shoes and Hamish was fixing Hubert's tie. Before they went downstairs she caught Hubert around the neck and grabbed Hamish and Harris' ears. "Right, you lot, listen up. Don't go making a fuss this evening. Just suffer through this and you can get away with murder the rest of the games. And call everybody by their proper name, okay? No Big Ken and Billy and Old Jimmy tonight."

"Let us go, Merde," Harris said, trying to get away without her twisting his ear.

Instead of relenting, she tightened her grip. "Okay?"

"Okay!" She let them go and they tumbled away, pulling at their shirts and straightening their hair, grumbling at her. As they trooped out ahead of her she sighed, set her shoulders, and put a smile on her face.

At the bottom of the stairs they were all waiting: James, Clarissa, and Jamie Macintosh, William and Lachlan Dingwall, and Kenneth, Margaret and Rob MacGuffin, along with a few other distinguished guests. The lords and their wives stood with Fergus and Elinor, while the triplets lurked off to one side, though Mum kept an eye on them. Merida knew where she was meant to go, so she went to where her peers, for lack of a better word, stood by their seats.

Her name was on the plate between Jamie's and Lachie's, with Rob opposite. On one hand she was glad not to have to look at Jamie all through dinner, but on the other, he was right next to her now. Merida resolved that she would at least try to be the mature young woman her mother somehow thought she could be.

"How was the rest of your year at uni, Merida?" Lachie asked. He was a permanently distracted-looking boy who was reading law. He'd make a

brilliant barrister, because to look at him no one would ever expect him to know anything, and if he did it would catch them all off-guard. She could imagine him flitting around the courtroom, asking random questions, befuddling witnesses and infuriating the other side.

Rob was fluent in Gàidhlig and not much more intelligible in English. He was going to be a civil engineer, which meant he was always going on about loads and structural properties of different building materials. He'd always been fascinated by the old bridge that led to the castle, and was forever taking photos of it. Her dad sometimes called him "the troll" for his interest in the bridge and his size, though he couldn't really help either of those things. If anything ever happened to the bridge, he'd be the first one Dad called. She had no doubt that he'd cry, but if anyone else would have the right information to rebuild it, it'd be Rob.

Jamie was theoretically studying history, though she didn't think he'd ever even seen his textbooks, let alone a lecture hall. She also didn't think he had any plans for the future.

"Oh, fine. Nothing too exciting."

Even though she refused to look at him, there was no missing the smirk in Jamie's voice. "And have you convinced anyone to join the glorious cause of independence?"

"Have you convinced anyone to ignore your face and shag you?"

"More than you have, I'm sure."

As always, Rob looked mildly traumatized by their bickering, and Lachie frowned past her at Jamie. Their expressions reminded her that she was supposed to be on her best behavior, not fighting with the stupid Macintosh hellspawn. She resolved to do better, and generally succeeded by ignoring him for the rest of the meal.

Unfortunately, sitting with the other ladies as they chatted after dinner made her long for even Jamie's company. At least with the lads she could mostly be herself; with the ladies she had to be polite, even demure, things that did not come naturally to her. If she kept her mouth shut and her expression fairly neutral she could make it through the night without offending anyone. As the mums around her prattled about domestic matters Merida's mind wandered. It would all begin in earnest tomorrow, and even though it would be the same things as in previous summers, she still felt a thrill of excitement. The pageantry, the music, the people admiring her country and its traditions all filled her with pride and delight and anticipation.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Notes:<strong>

Gàidhlig = Scottish Gaelic (Gailege = Irish)

Scots will be voting on a referendum on independence from the UK in autumn 2014. The characters' opinions on this issue are theirs, not mine.

### 3. Chapter 3

Breakfast was in full swing by the time Hiccup entered the kitchen. Apparently Snotlout thought that carbo-loading should happen right up until the start of the competition itself, because he was steadily making his way through a stack of pancakes the size of his head. Hiccup speared two pancakes and sat near his dad to eat, keeping well out of Snotlout's way.

"Good morning, son."

"Morning, Dad. What's the plan for today?"

"Well, Snotlout's preparing for his events tomorrow, so he'll be at the field most of the day. I expect Spitelout will be over there a fair bit as well. I thought this morning we could have a look around, and then in the afternoon there's an archery competition, if you'd like to watch that."

Just like all normal kids, Hiccup had gone through a Robin Hood phase, making a little bow out of sticks and twine and pretending to shoot the sheriff's men. It must be cool to have never grown out of that.

"Sounds good." Stoick nodded and Hiccup ate his breakfast. As he was finishing, at the other end of the table Snotlout dropped his fork with a clatter and let out a resounding burp. It was a total shame that Snotlout was going to busy all weekend, he thought.

On their way out the door Hiccup tucked his sketchbook into one pocket, thinking that he could get some quick studies in during the day.

The games were a constant bustle of activity. Vendors sold swords, kilts, baked goods, and books; different clans had tents set up with information about their families and places for members to relax. There were piping competitions, drumming competitions, dancing competitions, sheepdog trials, and the athletics. An historical society had costumed reenactors demonstrating traditional crafts, and a petting zoo allowed children to see sheep and goats and fat little pigs and a Highland cow and her calf.

As she made her way through the crowd, she couldn't help looking for Hiccup. A few times she thought she saw him, but she couldn't tell for sure; he wasn't as easy to pick out as she was. At noon her family and the other chieftains sat in the grandstands for the official opening, full of flags and music and salutes to the hosts. All she and the boys had to do was stand there, smile, and wave, though for her brothers that was hard enough. Her dad declared the games open, there was a great cheer, and she hurried off to check the archery range.

A few years ago she'd gone through a phase where she hated the games and acted like a stroppy cow whenever she was forced to participate. Her mum had been at her wits' end until one year she asked Merida what she'd like to do instead of telling her what to do. After fairly reasonable discussion an equestrian race through the forest had been deemed unfeasible, so she'd suggested archery instead. She'd been put in charge of organizing it all, and the programs listed her as the sole hostess of the event. The butts were ready, the range safely

roped off, the first group already stretching in preparation, and Merida was filled with satisfaction as she sat in the shade of the tent to watch.

\* \* \*

><p>They staked out a spot on one corner of the roped-off range. From it they had a clear view of the entrants, at least the right-handed ones, as they drew. There was a novice competition, where novice apparently meant people that were still better than him, followed by the intermediate level, and then the masters; but before the final round there was an announcement over the PA. "Ladies and gentleman, before the masters begin we have a special demonstration by one of our hosts at the games. Please welcome Merida DunBroch."<p>

He looked up sharply from the doodle of an arrow at the sound of her name. Yep, it was the same girl, though now she was wearing a short tartan skirt and a white polo shirt and her red hair was pulled back in a low, loose ponytail. She waved as people cheered and then proceeded to nail every target in a bull's-eye. It looked so easy, the nock and draw and breath and release, though he knew it was anything but.

\* \* \*

><p>A tiny little part of her had been getting worried when she hadn't seen him anywhere that morning. Not that she'd been looking for him. She definitely hadn't gone through the secret passage before breakfast to make sure that he wasn't still there; she just needed to make sure everything was locked and the grate had been put back right. At least now she knew she wouldn't get haunted by him. That was a relief. But then, as she watched the intermediate flight of archers, waiting for her exhibition, she saw a brown head bent over a notebook; when he glanced up it was him, squinting a little in the sunlight.<p>

When they announced her name she faced the crowd and waved, smiling brightly, but after that it was all business. Arrow after arrow hissed through the air into the targets, landing with satisfying thunks. She closed her eyes as she drew, feeling her fingertips brush over her cheek, and though she felt confident that she truly could hit the target with her eyes closed, she opened them anyway before she loosed. Some people did yoga or meditated to center themselves, but for Merida, this was it: breathe and let go.

The last target was the closest to where he sat. She allowed herself to look, just for a second; that half-smile was on his lips when their eyes met, and she winked before she turned her gaze forward and fired. The crowd cheered again and she curtsied. When the masters had shot she presented the winners with their trophies and the spectators started to wander away.

A few children stood at the edge of the range, and one of the volunteers brought out a bucket full of scaled-down bows and foam-tipped arrows. "Any of you want to try?" she asked, and they ducked under the rope eagerly. Fortunately none of them tried to shoot each other, and most of them managed to hit a target from a short distance. She grinned as one little girl ran off, telling her dad that she wanted a bow for her birthday.

"You know," said a voice behind her, "when you said you lived here, I didn't realize you owned the place."

"I don't. That's my dad." His eyes raked over her quickly, from her old trainers and the bits of grass clinging to her knees where she'd knelt to help the kids to the DunBroch tartan and her hair. There was nothing lascivious in his gazeâ€"she'd been ogled enough at work to recognize the differenceâ€"only curiosity; she waited for him to say one of the same stupid things people always did when they found out about her family, about how lucky she was and were they supposed to call her lady and growing up in a castle must have been like a fairytale.

Instead he said, "You're an awesome shot." He spoke with frank admiration, no 'for a girl' implied. "And you make it look so easy, that's the worst part."

"If that was a compliment, thank you."

"You're welcome." Over her shoulder he saw his dad walking away; it was almost time to meet up with Spitelout and Snotlout and head back to the house. "I gotta go. It was, um, nice seeing you again." He smiled and she nodded, letting him walk past her. She watched him go, thinking; just before he disappeared into the crowd she took a step forward.

"Hiccup," she called after him, and he turned. "Are you coming to the ceilidh tonight?" If he did she'd have someone decent to talk to, and he might keep the lads away. She'd buy him a drink to make up for yesterday, and then she'd have nothing to feel guilty about. It seemed her mum's years of nagging about being a good hostess and representative of the family and the clan were finally kicking in.

"I don't know. I wasn't planning on it." He paused and she felt a little disappointedâ€"or maybe that was just hunger. Then he cocked his head and said, "Do you think I should?"

\_Play it cool. Shrug and say 'If you like.'\_ Instead she nodded. "Yeah. I do."

He smiled. "Okay. See you."

She allowed herself a small smile before turning back to help put away the equipment.

\* \* \*

><p>By the time he joined his dad he was already standing with Spitelout, watching some attempts at the sheaf toss. Hiccup wondered why Stoick didn't compete in any of the throwing eventsâ€"he'd be a natural. Instead of asking that, the words "Hey, Dad, would it be alright if I went to the ceilidh tonight?" came out of his mouth.<p>

Both men looked at him like he'd grown another head, seemingly lost for words as they stared. "Of course," Stoick said eventually. "Do you want me to drive you?"

"Snotlout can," Spitelout said, "he's going. Lots of the athletics

guys are, so you'll have someone to hang out with."

Hanging out with guys who could throw him twenty feet into the air with ease was exactly the opposite of what he wanted to do. Luckily he was pretty sure that Snotlout wouldn't want him hanging around either. "Great! Thanks," he said, a big fake smile plastered on his face.

Snotlout called dibs on the shower first, and Hiccup wasn't about to argue with him. He ate a sandwich before he showered; then he stood in the room he shared with his dad, staring at the clothes he'd brought. He'd never been to the ceilidh before, but there was no way he was going to get fashion advice from Snotlout. It was a party, more or less, though a fairly traditional one; he figured there were likely to be a lot of kilts. A polo shirt and decent trousers would have to do for him. The dads wished them goodnight on their way out the door and Snotlout drove with the radio cranked up earsplittingly loudly; that was probably better than awkward silence between them, though. As soon as they were parked Snotlout took off, heading straight for a group of huge guys and calling over his shoulder that he'd find Hiccup when it was time to leave.

Once he was alone it occurred to Hiccup that this might not have been the best idea. Then he mentally shrugged and walked toward the great hall. If it turned out he had to hang out alone all night, it wouldn't be the worst thing that'd ever happened to him. Besides, he thought, stepping into the hall, this was Merida's family's thing, so she had to be there somewhere.

And she was. Surrounded by guys. Figured.

\* \* \*

><p>"Merida," Rob called, waving her over. "Like a dram?"<p>

She would, as a matter of fact. "\_SlÃ inte\_," she said, raising her glass, and they drank, the whisky sliding smoothly down her throat.

"Ah, that's the stuff," Jamie said. "Why don't you serve this at the Falconer?"

"We've got a bottle of it somewhere," she said defensively. "Anyway, all you ever order is foreign beer." Rob shot him a betrayed glance, and Jamie at least looked a little chagrined.

Her dad was seated at a table, telling a story to an enthusiastic audience; her mum was delivering a full bowl of pretzels to one of the other tables; her brothers were nowhere in sight. She hoped they wouldn't cause any trouble.

"Merida, do you really think independence is the best course? We've got the parliament; can we not be happy with that?" If it had been Jamie asking, she would have known he was just being an arsehole and ignored him, but this was Lachie. He might actually want to know her opinion. And if there was one thing Merida could do, it was tell people her opinion. He would probably regret itâ€"Jamie was already groaning, shaking his head with one hand over his faceâ€"but he \_had\_ asked. She launched into her response.

Lachie nodded along at first, but soon his brow furrowed. She knew without looking that Jamie was bored with the subject, but luckily for him, he didn't interrupt. A few minutes into her answer Rob wandered away; when he came back his hands were full of refills on their drinks. He handed the others their whiskies and then her a pint glass; she'd had a whisky with her dad earlier and the one with the lads, and that was about her limit for the hard stuff. Rob shrugged apologetically, but Merida recognized her cue to shut up and lifted her glass. "Cheers."

While her mouth was full, Rob spoke up. "Your dad was saying that he was thinking of having a falconry show next year. That'd be wicked."

"Lachie had best stay far from them. One might think you're a baby chick and carry you off," Jamie said, plucking at the other's hair. Lachie batted his hand away and scowled, baring his teeth. Rob rolled his eyes and shoved Jamie lightly. How they'd all managed to reach adulthood without killing each other, either on purpose or by accident, was a mystery; maybe it was the fact that they only saw each other on special occasions and spent the rest of the year at a safe distance.

She nodded and looked past them as they argued. He wasn't dancing, and if he was in that group of athletes in the corner she'd eat her hat. Then out of the corner of her eye she saw a single figure leaving the room. She excused herself from the group and hurried after him.

\* \* \*

><p>There were a few tables set up in the courtyard; probably they'd been put there for something else, but they were handy for a respite from the gaiety of the ceilidh. It was cooler and quieter here than inside. He wasn't hiding, or running away, or pouting, he told himself; he was just taking a break. From all the sitting he'd been doing inside. He sighed and dropped his head into one hand.<p>

When she said hi, Hiccup decided that his favorite thing about Merida was her sense of timing. "Hi."

"Mind if I join you?" She held a glass in one hand and he gestured to the seat across from him. She put down the glass and sat heavily before pushing back her hair and smiling at him. "Having a good time?"

"Yeah. You?"

"I'm exhausted, but yeah. Been up since five this morning."

"Wow." \_Say something. Don't just sit there like a moron\_. All this time to think of witty conversation and he came up blank.

"So where are you from?" she asked.

"A place called Berk."

She thought for a minute. "Up in the North Sea?"

He nodded. "My dad's the manager of the football team,

theâ€" "

"Wait," she commanded, holding up a finger as she thought for a minute. "That's the Hooligans, isn't it?"

"Good job. Not many people know that." The Hooligans were kind of a smaller club, not even getting close to playing in the Champions, though Stoick was working on that and their record had been improving.

"Just one of my many talents." She smirked and lifted her glass. The liquid inside was a faintly purplish red, not the gold or amber he'd expected. "Want a sip?" she offered when she noticed him looking.

He peered at it, leaning forward. "What is it?"

"It's snakebite and black."

"And that is...?"

"Half lager, half cider, dash of blackcurrant cordial." At his hesitant look she held the glass out across the table. "It's good. Try it."

It was better than he'd expected. Going to university hadn't really warmed him up to drinking beer, but this was okay. "Not bad," he said, licking his lips, and Merida thought back to the last boy she'd kissed, a third-year reading English lit. That had been back in December, at the party her building had hosted; he'd caught her under the mistletoe and effectively cured her of literature students forever. There were certainly attractive young men at uni and the Falconer, but none of them seemed that interesting beyond their carefully-maintained facial hair and expensive-but-made-to-look-vintage clothes. Was something wrong with her that she didn't want to kiss them, but she did want to kiss him? It was stupid. \_It's just the exhaustion and the drink\_, she thought.

One little kiss wouldn't hurt anything, though. She could be excused for acting on the impulses of youth and music and alcohol. All she had to do was lean over across the tabletop and grab his collar, pull him forward and slide her lips against his. It was exactly what this night needed.

And then of course someone would wander by and see and run off to tell the lord and lady. They were stressed enough with the games going on; they shouldn't have to worry about her as well. Not that she would do anything at all crazy, but her mum would worry all the same.

\_Whatever you do, don't embarrass your parents\_.

"So what do you do when you're not smoking people at archery?" he asked, handing the glass back.

"I'm at uni in Edinburgh. And I work in a pub. Pouring drinks and occasionally beating people at darts." She grinned, lightning-quick, and a warning chimed in his head at the wildness of her.

He leaned forward in spite of it. "Are you a hustler? How does that



work?"

"It's not a hustle. There's just a board with the high scores on it, and I'm usually near the top." She shrugged modestly. "Anyone who wants to can challenge me."

"And you win." She took a sip and pushed the glass back across to him. The second taste was even better than the first, he found.

"Pretty often. We can't really bet money on it, but I usually say that if I lose I'll buy a round for the challenger's party, and if they lose, they leave me a tip the worth of the round. Most guys agree to that. Of course, most of them don't expect to lose." She snagged the glass back.

"What I'm hearing is that you shouldn't be trusted with projectiles." He smiled that crooked little smile again.

"Oh, I should definitely be trusted with them. Trusted to put them right where they're meant to go." He was maybe a little scared of her. Even so, he returned her grin. Better to have her happy than otherwise.

"Have you ever thought of going to the Olympics?" He took the glass back and drank, then clarified, "For archery, not darts."

She shook her head, hair bouncing. "I'm nowhere near good enough for that. And I've got school and work and plenty around here to keep me busy."

"What are you studying?"

"Politics and international relations. I'm going to be the president, when Scotland becomes independent."

With that easy self-assurance, she was going to be whatever she wanted, that was for sure. He thought about it for a second. "But if Scotland leaves the UK, what would happen to your family? Wouldn't your father lose his title?"

"Maybe. But countries are about more than titles." Now she was leaning forward, fists clenched, eyes alight, her voice steely and growing louder. "Scotland deserves to be able to govern itself. London has decided our fate for centuries. It's time for that to change."

There was a pause in which he didn't know what to say, mainly because he just didn't know enough about the situation to feel like he should comment. But she certainly had a compelling point—or at least a compelling way of making her point—or at least compelling eyes. It was kind of hard to tell which at the moment.

She must have thought she'd bored him or something because she ran a hand through her hair and said, "My mum's always telling me not to be so strident at people, especially not relative strangers. Sorry."

"No, what? You don't have to apologize. There was nothing strident about that. It's cool that you care so much about it." It made him

wonder if there was anything he cared that much about.

She smiled a little. She could tell he wasn't just saying it to appease her, or, worse, to chat her up. "What about you? Are you studying?"

"Yeah. Architecture. Much nerdier than your stuff," he added self-deprecatingly.

"So that's why all the questions about the building."

"Yep. And I never thanked you for the fascinating tour through the castle the other day. I don't know why that's not included in the regular tour. It really gives the place a whole different flavor." He raised the glass to her.

She snorted. "I bet it does."

"I actually applied to a school down here. The Glasgow School of Art. They've got a really good architecture program."

"Did you not get in?" she asked sympathetically.

He shook his head. "Nah, I got in. But it was easier to go somewhere a little closer to home. I might transfer there this fall, though."

"Glasgow's not far from Edinburgh." She said it mildly enough, dragging a fingertip through the condensation on the outside of the glass, but one eyebrow arched delicately. He felt himself smiling slowly.

"That's good to know."

Lachie Dingwall bounded up to the table and grabbed her hand. "Come dance, Merida," he said brightly. Beyond him, in the great hall, there was a pause in the music. Better him than Rob, though she felt bad for leaving Hiccup behind.

She took a quick swig of her snakebite before she stood. "Duty calls," she said as Lachie tugged insistently at her. She pointed down at him. "Don't go without saying goodbye." Hiccup shook his head as she walked away.

Without thinking he picked up the glass and drank. She was the chieftain's daughter, one of the hostesses of the whole thing, so of course she'd have to dance with people when they asked. And besides that, she was cute. Way too cute to sit outside the party talking to someone like him. He set the empty glass down. What would be lamer: to sit outside by himself like an awkward loner, or to follow them inside like some kind of sheep? They were probably equally lame, so he stood and wandered toward the door.

If she wasn't having a good time out there then he'd never seen someone having a good time. A grin threatened to split her face; she spun and stomped, her hair whipping around her head and her skirt twirling. She looked like a force of nature, like a fire tornado. There was an intensity about her that was both magnetic and kind of intimidating.

His attention was drawn from the dancing by a red-haired boy stepping up in front of him. Another appeared by his side, who asked, "Were you talking to our sister?" as a third joined them.

"Whoa, okay, there really are three of you. Who's your sister?"

They stood with their arms crossed, and while they were shorter than him, it wasn't by much. Three pairs of eyes stared at him until the one on the right pointed at his hair impatiently. Hiccup's eyes flicked from them to Merida, still dancing away in the middle of the floor. The boys' hair was a shade browner than hers, but it was pretty obvious that they were related, with all the curls and the light blue eyes. "Oh. Yeah. I was."

"What were you talking about?"

"University, mostly. And Scottish independence."

They seemed disappointed at that answer. "Boring."

Hiccup wondered what the triplets thought they'd been talking about. Did they really think he looked like someone who'd be able to entice a girl like their sister? It was totally the opposite way around. If they were her brothers, they should get that by now.

"You know she could kill you, right?"

His eyes darted to her dancing. "Yeah, I figured that out."

"So don't do anything stupid."

He looked at the trio of stern young faces. "I can promise I won't do anything disrespectful toward your sister, because I'm not suicidal, but anything stupid?" He shook his head. "That I can't guarantee."

One of the faces opposite him twitched into a small, appreciative grin while the other two's eyes slid toward each other. "Yeah, well just remember that you're on our patch, laddie."

"We're watching you. Anything happens to herâ€" One drew his thumb across his throat, one lolled his head to the side and held up an invisible rope, and one pounded a fist into his palm.

"And we know the best places round here to hide a body."

"Got it," he said, nodding seriously. He probably should have been worried, but it was kind of flattering that they thought him hazardous enough to threaten.

The boys gestured that they'd be watching him before they faded away back into the crowd. It must be nice to have siblings who'd watch out for you like that. Stoick would issue beatdowns on his behalf, but he kind of had to, since he was Hiccup's dad and all. And Snotlout would just point and laugh if anybody tried to mess with Hiccup.

It was another half hour before the group of athletes made its way toward the door as one mass of muscle. "Let's go," Snotlout said as he brushed by, not even pausing, just expecting Hiccup to follow automatically.

"Just a sec." He scanned the room, but she was nowhere to be seen. She'd said not to go without saying goodbye, but that was just a thing people said, right? He didn't want to risk upsetting her, though. She was by far the most interesting person he'd met in a long time, and he wanted to hang out with her some more. But she'd disappeared and Snotlout was getting impatient.

"Come on, man, what are you waiting for?"

"Nothing," he muttered, turning to go. By now he should really be more used to disappointment.

Then she called "Hiccup!" At the sound of his name he stopped, grinning, as she hurried toward him.

"Hey. I was just looking for you."

"Leaving already?" Was she actually disappointed? Nah. Not possible.

"Yeah, my ride has to go rest up to throw more things tomorrow."

"Hiccup, what's taking so long? I'm not gonna wait around for you all night." Snotlout stomped over, but his demeanor shifted as soon as he saw Merida. "Hi. I'm Snotlout."

"Merida."

"Merida, huh? I don't think I've seen you around. Of course, I've been pretty busy over at the athletics ground."

"Oh?" She was doing a fantastic impression of someone who cared, if she did say so herself. Where was her mum to witness this display of manners?

"Yeah." Snotlout grinned smugly. "I'm planning to set a new personal record in the weight for height tomorrow. I've done it in practice already; now I just gotta do it in competition."

"I'm sure you will."

"Of course I will. I've been lifting and training just for these games. As you can see, it's paid off."

Part of Merida wished she meant it when she congratulated him. It was nice for him that he was improving, and she knew how good it felt to meet goals. But he was just so slimy and cocky, expecting her to swoon just because he was strong. She wondered how he'd react if she called her dad over and introduced him. That'd give him a clue about why she wasn't impressed. Instead she gave him a wan smile and turned to Hiccup. "I'm glad you came."

He was taken aback for a second but recovered to say, "Me, too. Thanks for the snakebite."

"Anytime. See you tomorrow?"

He shrugged carelessly. "Yeah, you might." It would've been cooler if

he wasn't just repeating the same thing she'd said earlier. Her expression said she agreed.

But then she leaned forward and kissed his cheek, her lips warm against his skin. "Good night, Hiccup," she said, and spun away, leaving him frozen in place.

Both boys stared after her, incredulity on Snotlout's face and shock on Hiccup's. "What just happened?" Snotlout asked. "Because it seemed like she just ignored me and kissed you, and that's all backwards."

"I think that's what happened." Snotlout started for the car and Hiccup stumbled after him. It was just a kiss on the cheek. It was no big deal. It was just a kiss. He was such a loser.

"But why? Chicks love me. What'd you do to her? Did you hypnotize her or something? If you can hypnotize girls you've gotta teach me that."

"I don't think I hypnotized her."

"Then why did she kiss you?" He didn't wait for an answer, which was good, because Hiccup couldn't come up with a believable one. "Who is that girl, anyway?"

Snotlout was the kind of person who'd be impressed that she was a member of the nobilityâ€"not that Hiccup wasn't also a little impressed; Berk didn't have anything like that so he'd never met an actual lord or lady before, though sometimes Hooligans fans treated Stoick like he was the king of everythingâ€"but that wasn't the most impressive thing about her. Based on what she'd said, that wouldn't be the way she'd want to be defined. Besides, he'd only be saying it to make himself look cooler, and that was wrong.

"She lives around here. I met her yesterday."

"You met her yesterday and she's still talking to you today? This is like the Twilight Zone." He put on an obnoxious announcer voice as he started the engine. "In a world where hot girls actually talk to Hiccup, what will become of real men like Snotlout?"

Hiccup wondered if Snotlout realized how much he was revealing about himself. "You do remember that I dated Astrid for like a year?" he said, letting annoyance creep into his voice.

"Now that was a hot chick," Snotlout said approvingly. "I don't know if all these girls were messed up in the head before, or if the sight of your ugly mug did it."

"Did you ever think that maybe some people are more interested in personality than looks?"

"Still doesn't explain why they like you," he said, just like Hiccup knew he would. That was his cue to stop talking.

But Snotlout thought she liked him, so he smiled out the window into the darkness.

\* \* \*

><p>This was no time to be thinking about a guy, yet here she was anyway. He was...he was a paradox, really. Being around him was calming in the midst of all this madness; he was almost as good as shooting for making her feel more centered. Because he didn't demand anything of her, he didn't want her to be something she wasn't, he didn't have any expectations about her. He let her be herself, the sometimes-slightly-grumpy girl who enjoyed her reputation for being no-nonsense and a little dangerous, and she appreciated that about him. She just felt comfortable with him around. It was strange to think that about someone she'd just met, but it didn't make it any less true.<p>

On the other hand, she had really, really wanted to snog him earlier, and she didn't go round wanting to snog just anyone. Some of her friends in Edinburgh had rather lax policies about who they'd kiss, especially when they had a pint or two in them, and she didn't fault them for that, but it wasn't her style. She'd grown up watching her dad steal kisses from her mum, Elinor giggling like a teenager as Fergus kissed her neck, the way she melted into his embrace when she thought no one else could see; she'd witnessed her mum stroke her dad's cheek tenderly, kissing away disappointment and frustration, and the very rare occasions when her inhibitions lowered and she let herself be a woman, not just a mother and a lady. As their daughter, Merida couldn't say she enjoyed seeing her parents that way, but it was far better than having them fight all the time.

So maybe she had high standards when it came to a potential partner and the way he would treat her. That didn't mean she couldn't kiss Hiccup.

She laughed quietly. Sometimes when they talked on the phone her mum asked not-so-subtle questions about whether she'd had any cute customers, or if she fancied any of her classmates. Every once in a while Merida would pick someone to tell her about, mostly to make her feel that her daughter wasn't going to end up an old spinster, lurking around the castle. Merida was happy with her life so far. She didn't see any reason to rush. And until she found someone who'd be the partner to her that Dad was to Mum, she'd kiss whoever she liked. Maybe she would kiss Hiccup, if she got the opportunity and if the time was right.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Notes:<strong>

ceilidh = a traditional party, with a live band and Scottish country dancing (where couples dance in groups of at least four; it's kind of but not really like square dancing, or the dances in movies based on Jane Austen novels)

"SlÃ inte" = "cheers," "to your health" in Gaelic

whisky = Scotland, Canada, Japan (countries without an e in the name); whiskey = Ireland, United States (countries with an e)

The UK granted Scotland its own parliament, based in Edinburgh, in 1999. Again, Merida's views on independence are not necessarily my own.

snakebite/snakebite and black = like the woman says, half lager, half (hard) cider, and blackcurrant syrup. In Edinburgh my bartender just called it a snakebite, but the consensus on the internet seems to be that if you want the blackcurrant then you'd better add that "and black."

#### 4. Chapter 4

In Hiccup's opinion, most of the athletics were just unsafe. Snotlout was in his element, though, among his people, the burly and brawny. Spitelout told them that his son's favorite event was the one where he threw a 28-pound weight backwards over his head with one hand, trying to see how high he could get it. Hiccup watched in horrified fascination as Snotlout took his place beneath the bar, weight at his feet. He made some standard getting-pumped-up faces before leaning down to grasp the handle on the weight; then he swung it between his legs, building momentum before heaving it upward with a grunt. The weight just barely cleared the bar, but it was good enough for the new personal record he'd promised. Snotlout grinned and high-fived the other guys as his dad cheered and Stoick and Hiccup clapped. His attempts at the next height were unsuccessful, but Snotlout was still jubilant.

After that the Haddocks were free to do what they wanted; Dad went off to schmooze at the clan tent. "I'll see you later," Hiccup said, and Stoick waved. "I'll be here."

He wandered through the crowds, idly checking out the other visitors. The place was a sea of tartan, with pipe music in the background. Every time he thought he saw her it was some other redhead. There were a lot of redheads. He wondered if there always had been at the games, or if it just seemed like they'd multiplied because he was looking for a certain one.

Closer to the castle there was an encampment of people dressed in old-fashioned costumes doing things like carpentry and weaving, answering questions and in some cases letting the visitors try their hands. Hiccup strolled by, only vaguely interested in their handiwork, until the ping of a hammer against metal caught his attention. The blacksmith was not particularly beefy, but clearly strong enough for his work. He held up a horseshoe, glowing orange-red, in his tongs as he explained the process of heating and cooling the metal. It was old hat to Hiccup, who'd heard all about tempering from Gobber. Even so, it was cool to see the smith work. Hiccup stepped back from the forge and pulled out his sketchbook, attempting to capture the man with hammer raised above the anvil.

Merida had gone back into the house to use the restroomâ€"she refused to go in a temporary loo when her own bathroom was right there. On the way out she heard the blacksmith's hammer. Last year she'd bought an iron rose from him, and her friends at school thought it was the height of cool, so she wanted to pass along their compliments. She waited for him to finish his demonstration, scanning the satisfied faces of the spectators and seeing one furiously drawing young man. She smiled involuntarily.

People were so much harder to draw than buildings. They moved too much, for one thing. And handsâ€"hands were great, really useful, but

pretty much impossible to get right. He groaned and erased yet another disproportionate pinky.

"They can't be that bad," a female voice, one he was quickly growing to recognize, said above him. His head shot up to see her looking at him, not his sketchbook. She was wearing shorts and a purple t-shirt with the games logo on it.

"Do you know how hard hands are to draw? Especially when they won't stop moving?"

"Can't say I do," she said, sitting down next to him. The page was full of quick sketches of the blacksmith and his tools; there were several attempts at the man's hands holding a hammer. They were all better than anything she could do, but she reckoned saying that would be like him telling her that her archery was good enough when she was dissatisfied.

She hopped up again and spoke to the smith, and the man smiled widely and nodded before he handed her a small hammer. Merida plopped down next to Hiccup again, this time straddling the bench. She let her grasp slip down the handle a bit for a more comfortable grip and then set her hand down, hammer and all, on his leg, just above his knee.

"Um." This was unexpected, but definitely not unwelcome.

With a raised eyebrow she looked from his sketchbook to his face pointedly; if he didn't recognize her offer, she might have to give up on him altogether. Then he gently moved her hand a tiny bit, rotating her wrist slightly. "That comfortable?" he asked, praying that his voice wouldn't crack.

"Grand." It was gratifying to see him flip to a new page in the book before he started. She watched him as he drew, his eyes quick, taking in everything: her short nails, the smudge of soot at the base of her thumb, the grain of the wooden handle.

"Thanks," he said, not looking up. "For modeling."

She laughed. "Can you imagine me as a model?" Actually, he could, even if she couldn't. "This is easy, just sitting here and not moving my hand. If you'd needed a face I wouldn't've been able to keep still long enough for that, but I'm pretty good with my hands."

"'Pretty good'?" he echoed, incredulous. "I would've gone with 'deadly' myself."

If that was a Shakespearean-type pun she'd be pleasantly surprised. "I don't like to brag," she said with a one-shouldered shrug. "I think my actions speak for themselves. Anyway, I haven't killed anyone yet."

"Give it time," he said, eyes meeting hers for a split second, amused and deeper green than they'd looked before. Then his attention returned back to his drawing.

Her fingers were long and slim, the bones light, the skin pale. No matter how ethereal her hand seemed, even wrapped around the hammer's handle, he couldn't possibly be fooled into thinking that she was



delicate or weak. It had been pure overkill for her brothers to threaten him when she could destroy him so easily. She could, but he didn't think she would, not if he could judge by the way her knee was brushing against his.

Of course, there was more than one way she could destroy him, and not all of them would necessarily hurt.

She was so busy studying the way his nose turned up at the end that she didn't notice her brother until he was kicking her shin. "Merde, Dad's looking for you," Hubert said. He glared a little at Hiccup out of principle.

"Hiccup, this is my brother Hubert. Hubert, this is Hiccup."

"We met last night," Hiccup said, nodding at Hubert.

They'd threatened him well enough the night before that he could ignore the guy now. "Come \_on\_, Merde."

"Alright!" Merida turned to Hiccup. "Done?"

He shrugged. "Done enough." It could use a little more refinement, but he was satisfied with it. It was amazing how much easier it was with a reference that didn't move. He slid the sketchbook over and watched her as she looked at it. As long as he was happy with it she couldn't complain, but for what it was worth she thought it was a very good drawing.

She handed the book back with a nod, moved her hand from his leg, and stood. "I guess I'd better go before the other two show up." He mumbled an okay. She should suggest meeting up again, but maybe he didn't want to. Maybe she should wait and see if they just happened to run into each other later. Though the odds of it were pretty good, it sounded too much like a romantic comedy for her taste.

"Merida?" She turned, looking expectant; Hiccup had stood and was watching her, expression determined, though his cheeks were flushed. They must look a strange pair, her with a hammer and him with his sketchbook. "See you at the concert tonight?"

She grinned. "I'll find you."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Notes:<strong>

weight for height/weight over the bar = throwing a weight, from 28 up to 56 pounds, backwards over a bar

the Shakespearean death pun thing = "to die" meant "to orgasm"

## 5. Chapter 5

He'd only known her for a short time, but if Merida said she'd find him, then she'd find him. And if she hadn't said it, he would have. By the time they got back to the games the area in front of the stage was full of people. The others could stand if they wanted, but he wasn't going to. He grabbed his dad's arm and pointed to a bench.

"I'm gonna stay here."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You sure?"

"Completely. Go, have fun." Stoick nodded and followed the Jorgensons.

Once the music started she slipped away from her brothers. They wouldn't mind, if they even noticed she was gone. The music had her blood thrumming along her veins as she went, searching for him and plotting. Security guards were stationed at the edges of the festival to keep people from getting into places they shouldn't, though it was inevitable that some would slip through, into the woods. She wouldn't take him out there. Aside from the greater chance of being caught and turned back, there were only a few reasons to sneak into the woods at a festival: to shag, to do drugs, or to have a pee. If she'd wanted to do any of those things, she'd be able to find a better place to do them, since this was her home. No, she knew the perfect place.

He was sitting at a picnic table at the very back of the crowd. It wasn't a good place to see the concert from, though it would be easy enough to hear; maybe he didn't care about seeing it. She grabbed his hand from where it rested on the table and pulled lightly, pausing long enough for him to scoot off of the bench and stand. Then she headed for the house with him following. He knew he should be more curious about where she was leading, but he was on vacation. He could get away without thinking for a while. He started by rearranging their hands to lace their fingers together—so she wouldn't lose him in the crowd.

Once or twice she glanced back over her shoulder, though she couldn't doubt he was still there, not with their hands linked. Light and shadow from the concert fell across her face, her curls looking even wilder in the dizzying flickers. He tightened his grip, felt her fingers squeeze back.

\* \* \*

><p>Merida ran up the steps easily, lightly. Hiccup followed more slowly, cautious in the shadowy tower. At the top she pushed open the door and stepped out. The music was still audible up here, though much quieter, and she walked around to the side overlooking the loch and leaned on the wall, staring over the calm water. He leaned next to her, their shoulders not quite touching. The moon was a day or two past full but still bright overhead; the lake shone mirror-like, surrounded by gunmetal hills.<p>

"When I was little I used to pretend I was something that could fly, but only when I wore my special cape, and the cape had gone missing so I was stuck here. Like the stories about selkies."

"What's a selkie?"

"They're magical creatures who look like seals. Only they can take their seal-skin off, and then they look like humans. In the stories a fisherman sees a beautiful woman swimming and finds a seal skin. He

takes it home and hides it, and marries the selkie woman and she has his children. But one day, while he's at sea, she finds her skin and slips away again. Back to her real home and her true nature."

"That's really sad," Hiccup said. He wasn't sure if the saddest part was when the selkie got trapped on land or when the husband and kids got left behind. It was just sad for everybody all around.

"I'd pretend I was an air-selkie. I hunted all over for my cape, and then I'd come up here to smell the wind, because it was the closest I'd get to flying."

"I can get feeling the wind in your hair, but smelling it?" he asked, amused.

"Yeah." She smiled over her homeland. "Some days it smells like the loch, wet and fishy and cold, and some days it's like the mountains, like dirt and heather and pine trees. And some days it's like nothing I've ever smelled before, and then I can imagine it's a country I've never been to."

She rested her head on her arms against the parapet and looked up at him. The moonlight leached some of the color out of him, leaving him looking strange and cold and her wanting to warm him up. He stared at the countryside below them like he was watching for selkies in the loch. It was miles to the sea, though, and the loch was freshwater, and he wouldn't take a selkie's skin even if she handed it to him.

"What's Berk smell like?"

He looked down at her when she asked and saw her watching him with curious eyes. He couldn't say he'd ever thought about it before. It just smelled like Berk. "Sheep," he said, and she laughed quietly. "Sheep and salt water, and cedar, and—" He could smell it now with his eyes closed, a faint metallic tang and the scent of decaying leaves, even as the new ones unfurled. He'd only been gone a few days, but he missed it all of a sudden, just a little bit.

"I don't think I've ever smelled Berk from here."

He opened his eyes, mouth quirked in a crooked smile. "You can't trust secondhand smells anyway. You'd have to smell it in person to really appreciate it."

"Maybe one day I will." Her lilting voice, the glint in her eyes, the curls and curves of her hair and lips and body, she was all promise and challenge. He looked away, swallowing thickly; if she kept this up he was in danger of losing his ability to act normally, or as normally as he was ever able to act.

She pushed off of the wall and stepped back in one smooth movement to sit, leaning back against the tower's sloped roof. He joined her with far less grace, grimacing a little as his leg clanked against stone, but if she heard it, she made no mention. She stared into the sky; he dragged a fingertip through the gap between two of the ancient stones.

When she saw what he was doing she asked, "What's your favorite

architecture thing?"

He could ask for clarification, if she meant why he loved it or what his favorite style was or what architect he most admired or what building he had to see in person before he died, but he could also just answer, without overcomplicating it. "Flying buttresses," he said, then waited for her to laugh or restate the question.

"Tell me about them."

She probably already knew all of this, but he told it anyway. "Well, during the Middle Ages it was all about castles and cathedrals. Castles were built to be strong. They had to keep the bad guys out and the good guys safe inside. They could have thick walls and tiny arrow slits and they didn't necessarily have to look good, as long as they do their job.

"Cathedrals, though, those have to be beautiful. But in the early medieval period it was hard to build high without using really thick walls. And really thick walls aren't good for putting windows in, so the Romanesque churches were kind of low and dark. That didn't fit with most people's idea of God's house. But high walls would get too heavy and collapse." He took her hand and held it up between them. Clenched in a fist it was a Romanesque wall; he pushed against it lightly and it was solid, unmoving. Then he uncurled her fingers, straightening her hand with her palm facing toward him. He set his fingertips to hers and applied the slightest pressure, and her fingers flexed backward, like a bowing wall.

"So they came up with the idea that if the walls were supported by these arches on the outside, it would distribute the weight over a greater surface area, making it more stable." He bent his fingers at the middle joint and placed them at the middle joints of her fingers, forming an arch in the space between their palms. "And that meant that the walls themselves could be lighter and higher and hold more windows.

"Flying buttresses are beautiful and graceful, but they have no purpose without the walls they support. They make even greater beauty possible. It's exponential."

She was speechless watching him, a contented expression on his face as he explained it. When he took her hand to demonstrate her heart responded to his touch, capable but light. He glanced up when he finished, his eyes meeting hers, and she wondered distantly if this was the same thing he'd felt when he'd said her passion for independence was cool. This wasn't cool; this was who he was, to the core, humor and intelligence and strong hands that made her glad she was already sitting down. She hadn't thought to whisper his name but there it was in the air a second before their lips met.

The way she said his name set off a tickle behind his navel, and then she was kissing him. His gasp of surprise was muffled by her lips. He may not have known what DunBroch smelled like but he knew what its oldest daughter tasted like, like spearmint and the faintest bit of what must have been whisky. She pulled back and looked at him, and her lips curved slowly up.

\_This is the kind of impulsive behavior that loses you a leg\_, a prim voice in his head reprimanded as he skimmed his palm along her jaw

and around to the back of her neck. He kissed the very corner of her mouth and she made an unholy little noise and turned her head to slot her lips against his hungrily.

\_Ah, fuck it\_.

She hadn't meant to end up with her legs thrown over his lap, but she had absolutely no complaints about the arrangement. Especially not with one of his hands tugging gently at her hair and the thumb of the other hand rubbing up and down over her ribs. He was better at this than his occasional awkwardness had led her to believe he'd be, and that itself was exciting. She shivered, knowing that they should slow down but not feeling all that motivated to make it happen. Eventually, though, reason and the need for oxygen won out.

He probably had the world's dopiest grin on his face. He felt like he'd earned it, though. "Kiss a beautiful girl in a 14th-century castle: check." When she laughed he realized he'd said it out loud and blushed.

"Is that an architecture student thing, making a list of buildings to kiss people in?" She leaned back, her weight braced on her hands behind her, though she didn't move her legs.

"More like wishful thinking," he said, staring unabashedly as she tossed her hair back, then went on, "I bet it's something all fields of study do. Like, French: on top of the Eiffel Tower. History: in the middle of Times Square, like in the V-E Day picture. Political science: at the UN building."

"English: in Shakespeare's house," she suggested.

"Computer science: in real life." That made her guffaw, and he grinned. He wondered if it would be alright to kiss her again. His skin buzzed where she'd touched him; he wanted to feel more of her, if she'd let him. This felt like flying to him, like he was soaring hundreds of feet above the ground with nothing tethering him.

Until she asked, "When do you have to go home?"

"Our flight's on Monday morning, but we have to get back to Aberdeen tomorrow night."

"Can you stay until after the closing ceremony?"

"I think so." He ran a hand through his hair. "It's funny, I didn't really want to come to the games this year. Now I'm pretty glad I did."

She arched an eyebrow and leaned forward, pressing a kiss to the hinge of his jaw. "Only pretty glad?" she asked in his ear, and to her delight he groaned, reaching to snake an arm around her waist.

"Merida..."

Beyond the sound of his voice there was something missing. She held up a hand abruptly and shushed him. That was unexpected. She turned her head away, giving him a face full of curls. It was quiet; what was she listening for? She turned back, blinking slowly. "The music's

over."

All at once panic doused his high. "The concert's done?" \_Oh, shit\_. He scrabbled the phone out of his pocket: dead. "Oh, \_shit\_. Ah, do you have a phone? I gotta call my dad."

She leaned back again, swinging her legs off of him and half-lying against the roof to reach into her pocket, and he wished he could appreciate how amazing that looked but he was a little worried about his impending death right now. "I can give you a ride," she offered, handing over the phone.

"Thanks. I still have to call, though, or he'll flip out and call the police to find me." She huffed and he shook his head as he stood. "I wish I was joking."

"You're an adult, though. That sounds a bit overprotective." As if her mum wasn't nearly as bad. Her mum would not approve of this current situation in the slightest. With any luck, her mum would never know about it.

"Yeah, well, having a dead wife and a kid with the tendency to lose limbs will do that to you." His uneasiness made him snap, which made him feel bad, which just added to his growing feeling of dread. He finally got the number in and pushed call. "I apologize in advance for the cost of this long-distance call. Dad. I'm sorry, my cell diedâ€" "

"Where are you?" He sounded just as happy as expected.

"I'm still at the castle. With a friend."

"A friend?" he snapped.

"A girl. But she can give me a ride, so I'll be there in a minute. Sorry."

"If you're not here in twenty minutes I'm coming for you." He hated it when his dad got all Liam Neeson on him. He sighed as he ended the call; when he turned back Merida already had the door open.

She flipped on the lights in the tower and they headed down the stairs, considerably less cheerfully than they'd gone up. Stoick was going to be so ragingly disappointed; Hiccup didn't even think he'd get points for being with a girl. At the bottom of the stairs she turned off the light before cautiously opening the door. He closed it behind them and she led the way through the dark hall, one arm behind her to hold on to his hand. They left the great hall for the kitchens and were almost to a side door when the overhead lights came on with a deafening click of the switch and buzz of electricity. He dropped her hand guiltily, then felt guilty about letting go.

"Merida?"

"Dad." Merida's dad was the size of his dad, and now Hiccup had something else to worry about.

"Where've you been, lass?" Fergus caught sight of him and Hiccup saw the man's face darken even across the room. "And who's this?"

"Dad, this is Hiccup. Hiccup, my dad. He missed his ride after the concert, so I'm just going to pop out and give him a lift. I'll be back in a tick."

Her casual confidence did not convince him of anything, though Hiccup was plenty impressed by it. "You will not. What were you doing that made him miss his ride?"

"We were just up at the top of the tower," she mumbled. On one hand, her dad didn't ask what they were doing up there, but on the other, he looked like he had an idea.

"Merida, that's dangerous and you know it! And it's one thing for you to stupidly risk your own neck, but another to risk a guest's."

"I know, Dad. I'm sorry."

"Go on up to bed and I'll call the lad a taxi."

"That's silly. No one'll come out here at this time of night, and it'd cost a fortune beside. And I promised to give him a ride."

"Well, that's a promise you'll just have to break."

"But Dad—"

"Hush. I've a mind to go wake your mum and tell her about all this." Merida clamped her mouth closed, nostrils flaring. He turned to Hiccup. "Now, boy, where are you staying?"

"At a vacation cabin on the east side of the lake, about 15 minutes away. Sir. My lord."

Her dad stared at him for a long minute, his expression stony. Finally he said, "I'll drop you there. Merida, upstairs."

"Please let me go. It was my fault he missed his ride and I want to make sure he doesn't get in trouble."

"Then you should've made sure he didn't miss it in the first place." He sighed wearily, rubbing at his eyes. "You will sit in the back and not make a sound, d'you hear me?" She nodded and he pushed past them out the door. Hiccup blew out a breath, puffing his cheeks, as he turned to follow, and she squeezed his arm.

"You, up here," Fergus ordered, and Hiccup climbed into the front passenger seat. They rode in silence over the bridge and past the empty parking lot; when he swung out onto the road he asked, "Where are you from?"

"Berk."

"What do you do up there?"

"I'm an architecture student. Just finished my second year."

"So you're, what, 20?"

"Yes, sir."

"As a 20-year-old and an architecture student, don't you think you should know things like how to tell time and not to climb up towers in the dark?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why did you, then?"

"Not to try to shift the blame, but I was just following Merida." That sounded exactly like shifting the blame, so he added, "I wanted to spend more time with her. She's the most..." He cast about for the right word. 'Exciting,' while true, would sound unnecessarily provocative; ditto 'passionate,' and 'captivating' was close behind. He went for the safest option. "...interesting person I've met in a long time." He meant it, of course, but it also seemed to have a softening effect on her father.

He wasn't giving up just yet, though. "And you didn't think to stop her when she started up the tower?"

He probably didn't want to hear just how little thinking had figured into any of it. Hiccup shrugged one shoulder. "It's her home. She grew up there. If she thought it was safe, I had no reason to believe it wasn't. I trust her."

"There's your first mistake," he muttered, and in the backseat Merida wrinkled her nose at the slight. "Do you know, you're the first boy she's snuck up there?"

"Dad!" She knew she was meant to stay quiet, but this was horrific. She covered her face with her hands. It occurred to her that she could have said "That you know of," but this was not the time for rebellious lies. Hiccup stared resolutely ahead, trying not to feel proud, while Fergus glared into the rearview mirror.

"That means she must think you're something special." It just got worse and worse. She regretted asking to come along. "Why is that?"

"I don't know," Hiccup said honestly. "I was wondering that myself."

"She could have her pick of the lads. There's at least three of them in love with her." Maybe being humiliated in front of him was her punishment. Anyway, it wasn't true. She clapped both hands over her mouth in order not to protest. "Why you?"

"Maybe I was just...an easy target. I'm only here a couple days and then she never has to see me again." The words that he didn't know he'd been thinking and the fear of them being true felt bitter in his mouth. Her dad didn't seem to like the sound of them, either, and Hiccup knew, somehow, deep down, that it hadn't been like that. "I don't think that's it, though. She doesn't need easy targets. She's too good for them." That was true, though it didn't explain what made him worthwhile.

She wanted to sob and pressed her hands tighter over her mouth, afraid of the sounds that might come out of it. That he didn't see



how brilliant he was, why anyone would be lucky to snog him, was heartwrenching; that he'd (however briefly) accused her of using him rankled; and then his defense, his perfect summary of his belief in her character, made her feel like she could fly. If she were more daring she'd reach forward and take his hand, Dad's disapproval be damned.

He was holding out, though, somehow; after what Hiccup had just said she didn't know how her dad could still doubt him, but maybe it was a parental thing. "What will your parents think?"

"That is a problem," Hiccup admitted. "Dad didn't sound happy on the phone. He already worries, and eventually he'll understand that it was just a mistake, but it'll take a while."

"And your mum?"

"She's been dead for years." He knew exactly how many, down to the day, but he'd never played the poor-motherless-wretch card and he wasn't about to start now, especially not when it might sound like a bid for lenience. "It's part of the reason Dad worries so much."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Fergus said, suddenly much quieter. Hiccup nodded, because there was nothing to say.

They rode in silence for a moment, each of them thinking. Apologizing was something he had plenty of practice with, so Hiccup went for it. "I'm sorry about all of this. I wasn't expecting to meet you this way." He couldn't say he'd been expecting it at all, but in retrospect it had always been a possibility.

Fergus sighed. "Aye, well, knowing Merida I ought to have expected something the like." Really, the only surprise was that it hadn't happened sooner. And part of him was pleased that she'd found someone to spend time with who was her choice, not someone he and her mum had pushed her into contact with, while another part was proud of his mad wee girl, standing up to him to protect her friend. At the moment he had to at least pretend to be the stern parent, though.

When the headlights swung across the house the door opened and Stoick stepped out, radiating disapproval even though he was wearing pajama pants printed all over with the Hooligans logo. Hiccup took a deep breath as Fergus shut the car off. Dad wouldn't yell at him too bad with other people there, but that meant they were just delaying the inevitable.

Hiccup saw his dad's eyes narrow as Fergus got out and strode forward. "I'm Fergus DunBroch, Mr..."

"Stoick Haddock." Now that the two of them were in the same place the differences between them were more obvious: Stoick was taller, though not by much, and had a longer beard; Fergus' nose had obviously been broken more times and there was more grey in his hair. But they were both massive and auburn-haired and he wasn't sure it was a good idea for them to hang out. As his dad stuck his hand out, Hiccup almost leapt forward to stop them, sure that one of them was the other's double from an alternate universe and if they touched it would rip a hole in the fabric of space-time. There wasn't even an ominous flash of lightning as their hands met, so then he started to worry that the

two were actually brothers separated at birth and he'd been making out with his cousin.

Merida stepped into the space between Hiccup and her dad, conscious of Mr. Haddock studying her. He looked tired, even more than her own dad did.

"Thank you for bringing my son back. I'm sorry for the inconvenience he caused you."

"But it wasn't Hiccup's fault, Mr. Haddock, it was mine." Merida paused and then added, "Except for his mobile battery dying."

"Yeah, but I shouldn't've gone with Merida without telling someone first. That's my fault, too."

Neither man said anything for a minute. Stoick looked like he was trying to reason through a particularly bizarre dream, what with the fellow giant and someone ready to defend his son instead of just blaming it all on him. This was going to be it. He was going to tell Hiccup to go upstairs and pack and they'd leave in the morning and Merida would remember him as a total loser.

"No harm done," Fergus said, and Merida's head shot around to look at him. "Mr. Haddock, I don't know if you were planning to stay until the end of the games, but there's a parade and closing ceremony tomorrow afternoon. I'd like to invite the two of you to join my family in the chieftain's box to watch it."

If Hiccup's dad was as gobsmacked as she was, he did a better job not showing it. It did take a moment for him to respond, though; eventually he said, "That's very kind of you, thank you."

Her dad took it as agreement. "It starts at four. I'll have your names on the list. Good night."

"Good night."

Fergus nodded and returned to the car. Hiccup's face registered complete bewilderment when she glanced at him before turning to his father.

"Good night, Mr. Haddock," she said politely. "I'm sorry about the misunderstanding."

"'S alright," he grunted. "Good night."

She turned to Hiccup and bit back a grin at the look on his face. "Good night, Hiccup," she said sweetly.

"Night, Merida." His answer was distant, and she chuckled. Then, impulsively, despite the fact that their dads were watching or maybe because of it, she leaned forward and gave him a peck full on the lips.

"Sweet dreams."

If his dad didn't kill him, the repeated shocks to his central nervous system might. As the car door slammed behind him he looked at Stoick and shrugged helplessly. The expression of disbelief was still

on his dad's face, even more warranted now after Merida's display. Stoick shook his head, but all he said was "Go plug your phone in. We'll talk in the morning."

Hiccup wasn't going to argue.

\* \* \*

><p>"Merida," her dad groaned as she got in the car, "was that really necessary?" <em>That was nothing<em>, she thought, though she kept it to herself. "I don't mind if you fancy him"

"Good." She didn't, but she wasn't going to let her dad think he could control her emotions.

"but you don't have to rush anything. He's leaving tomorrow. What then?"

"There are these things called telephones that you can use to keep in contact with people at long distances. Besides, this isn't the Middle Ages, Dad. Just because I've kissed him a few times"

"A few? Merida"

"doesn't mean we have to get married."

His grip tightened on the steering wheel, and Merida remembered that she still wasn't in the clear. Dad could tell Mum, and then she might get in actual trouble. To change the subject slightly, and because she was curious, she asked, "Why did you invite them to join us?"

"I felt bad for Hiccup. What you did was ill-advised, to say the least, but you're both adults, and it's not worth ruining anyone's trip over, including yours." Just when she was about to praise his compassion he added, "And I think Stoick Haddock is the manager of the football club up in Berk."

"He is. Hiccup said last night. At the ceilidh," she clarified when his eyes widened. She sighed. "Honestly, Dad, do you think I'd let a guy I've only known for two days get into my knickers?"

"You would if it was that Hawkeye fella."

"While that goes without saying, I don't think you have to worry about Jeremy Renner stealing me away." He grumbled something about no one stealing her away and she smiled. When he parked she slid out and hurried around to the driver's side, throwing her arms around him. "Thank you, Dad."

"Justbe careful, eh, love?" His eyes were worried; guilt stabbed through her.

"I will. I promise. I love you." She stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

"I love you, too. Now get on up to bed, and I'll see if I can manage not to wake your mum."

As she crept into her room, Merida thought it over. Even if her mum found out and scolded her in the morning, her time with Hiccup would

still be worth it.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Notes:<strong>

Unless you are James of St George himself come down from on high to tell me I'm wrong, I'm satisfied with dating at least parts of the castle from the 14th century.

Hiccup as an easy target was first brought to my attention by one of Hubedihubbe's Big Four comics. [hubedihubbe. tumblr post/ 49081854895/more-hiccup-is-a-little-too-easy-to-shove](https://www.tumblr.com/hubedihubbe/49081854895/more-hiccup-is-a-little-too-easy-to-shove)

Mel and I are now accepting applications to join the Flying Buttress Appreciation Society.

## 6. Chapter 6

I'm glad you all liked the last chapter so much! Thanks again for the reviews, favorites, and follows; they really mean a lot to me.

\* \* \*

><p>Their conversation the next morning went like this.<p>

HICCUP: Dad, I know what you're going to say.

>STOICK: Alright, what am I going to say?<br>HICCUP: It was irresponsible of me to go off without telling anyone. I worried you, I probably kept Spitelout and Snotlout from getting home, and I put Lord DunBroch out. I owe you all an apology. For somebody who's supposed to be so smart, I act like an idiot sometimes.

>STOICK: So if you know all that, why didn't you do it?<p>

Hiccup slumped into a chair. His default response of "I don't know" was patently false in this case. He looked across the table at his dad, stirring a mug of tea. "Dad. You saw her. She's an archer and she works in a bar and she's going to be the president of Scotland. How am I supposed to say no to her? How is a guy like me supposed to do anything but follow when a girl like that says come?"

Stoick regarded him over the rim of the mug as he sipped his tea. His son was bright, handy, creative, capable, funny, charming, handsome, and generally ignorant of all of those good qualities. He'd been surprised when Astrid had been taken with him, and now he was again with this girl. They clearly saw that he was a good man, so why couldn't he? Stoick wondered if Hiccup would have turned out differently if his mother were still around. Perhaps he'd be more confident, and have a better understanding of women. Maybe he should've remarried, or hired a babysitter instead of bringing Hiccup to the stadium to do his homework while the team practiced, but somewhere along the line his boy had gotten the idea that he wasn't good enough, and it broke his heart.

"When the phone rang and they told me there'd been an accident I thought my heart'd stopped. I thought no, not my boy. He's got so much to do. He's going to change the world. They told me that they'd had to take off your leg and they all looked so sad, like they thought I'd be upset that you'd never play football, but I just

wanted to laugh because you were still alive. I'm sorry ifâ€”that I made you feel like you weren't good enough for not being interested in sports. I'm sorry it took almost losing you forever to make me see that I was going to lose you. You think you're not good enough for other people, that you should feel lucky when they notice you? That's bollocks, plain and simple. You're as good as any man, and you're better than most of us. Anyone who says otherwise is a fool or a liar, and I'm sorry I've been a fool for so long."

Hiccup couldn't remember the last time his dad had said so many consecutive words to him at once. He wasn't the world's most communicative guy, especially not when it came to non-football-related feelings. And to hear him say all this when he was expecting a lecture on responsibility and maturity was still more surprising. Stoick's face was serious, though even without looking he knew he'd meant all of it. He thought to throw his dad's earlier question back at himâ€”if you know all this why did you act the way you did for so long?â€”but he knew why. He had been lost after his wife had died; he'd just been able to hold it together enough to get the job with the Hooligans, and that had saved him, given him something to do and to look forward to. He hadn't meant to ignore his son and make him feel like a bunch of sweaty footballers were more important to him than his only child; it had just happened, and Hiccup understood now, but it had left a mark. And though he couldn't just make it go away, at least Stoick acknowledged that he'd been wrong.

"Thank you, Dad." It was all he could think of to say.

Stoick nodded and took another sip of his tea. "So this girl, Merida. She sounds...feisty."

He watched his son's face break out in a grin. "That's exactly what she is. I think you'll really like her when you get a chance to talk to her."

"If you like her, I'm sure I will too."

\* \* \*

><p>Any hope she'd had of seeing Hiccup during the day faded as the morning progressed. She went with her mum to listen to the storyteller, then to sample shortbread and tablet and Eccles cakes and jams from beaming vendors, eager to please the ladies. She'd borrowed some money off her mum to buy cakes for the boys and tablet for Hiccup, wondering if he'd ever tried it before and how sweet he'd taste after eating it. She almost wandered right into a tent pole as she thought about that.<p>

"What's got you so distracted?" her mum asked, taking Merida's elbow to guide her through the crowd.

"Just thinking."

"Of what? Or should I say who?" She raised an eyebrow and Merida pouted.

"He told." She should have known he wouldâ€”Fergus was powerless against his wife's powers of persuasion.

"He mentioned a boy, and not one of the usual hopefuls." Elinor tugged on her arm, smiling eagerly. "Tell me about him."

Merida shrugged. "There's not much to tell. And it doesn't matter, because he's leaving today anyway." She suddenly felt sadder than the situation warranted. He was just a boy to have fun with during the games, a friend-with-very-select-and-limited-benefits. So why did her stomach drop when she thought of him going away?

Elinor took in her daughter's downcast face and put her arms around her. "Oh, love. You don't have to stay with me if you want to go and find him."

"No, Mum, it's fine." She smiled. "I'll see him before he goes. Now come on," she said, putting her arm through her mother's. "Let's go see the coos."

\* \* \*

><p>"Hiccup! Mr. Haddock!" the chieftain called, waving. They climbed into the grandstand and Fergus made the introductions.<p>

"This is my wife, Elinor, Merida you already know, and the boys, Hamish, Harris, and Hubert." The triplets looked from their father to Stoick and almost immediately started whispering among themselves. "You lot, this is Stoick Haddock and Hiccup."

"It's nice to meet you both," Elinor said, smiling politely.

"And you, my lady."

"Please, call me Elinor."

"Then I'm just Stoick."

"Why don't you sit here, and Hiccup can sitâ€œ"

"By me," Merida offered, a bit too quickly. "That is, if that's alright with you," she added, mildly, to him.

"It's fine with me," he said, stepping up a row to join her and trying not to grin too wide.

She wanted to ask if he'd gotten in trouble after they'd left last night, but there was no way to do it without being obvious. Instead she asked, with exaggerated politeness, "Have you been enjoying the games, then?"

She'd put her hands down on the bench on either side of her, and he did the same, placing his hand just shy of touching hers. "Yes, thanks. I'm really glad we came this year."

"Ah, that's sweet. I'm glad you've been enjoying yourself." Her hand covered the space so that their pinkies lined up flush against each other.

Elinor glanced back at the pair of them, a suspicious look on her face at Merida's unusual solicitude, but she looked back innocently until her mum turned round again. "What's been your favorite part?"

He lifted his pinky and crossed it over hers. "Definitely the tour of the castle."

"Yes, our home has many fascinating features." She worked her pinky out from under his and put hers on top.

Then the ceremony began and kept them from talking much more. They all stood to sing "Flower of Scotland," and as they sat again he caught her hand and held on to it. She smiled, eyes on the clans filing by, and scooted closer to him.

\* \* \*

><p>At the end they all stood, some more reluctantly than others. Stoick looked at Hiccup and said, apologetically, "I guess we should get going. Thank you for letting us join you."<p>

"Oh, don't hurry off. It's going to be mad trying to get out of the carpark now. Come in the house for some tea while you wait for the rush to die down," Elinor offered. Fergus nodded and Merida bit her lip, waiting for Stoick to disagree.

"Alright," he said, "if it's no trouble," and she had to contain her little hop of happiness.

"Not at all," Elinor said, leading the way. Hiccup and Merida came last, their hands brushing between them.

"It's crazy how you just call it 'the house.'" He spread his arms wide to encompass the building as they passed through the gate. "The house. Like it's not a huge centuries-old castle."

"People tend to think you're a tosser if you talk about your castle all the time, though. It's our home."

In the kitchen the lady of the house put the kettle on and the lord searched for mugs. Merida found the cakes she'd stashed away for the boys and tossed them to Hubert, sliding the tablet into the waistband of her skirt. She found a tray of shortbread and set it on the table in the corner.

"Ah, Merida, why don't you take Hiccup to see the library?" her dad suggested. "I think there's a book or two about the history and architecture of this place." Had he just winked? She didn't stop to second-guess.

"Right. Come on, Hiccup." She left the room with what her mum would probably call unseemly haste, Hiccup on her heels.

The library was a beautiful room, lined floor to ceiling with shelves full of books, ranging from old issues of National Geographic and Top Gear to her mum's textbooks from uni (she'd taken a first in art history) to the diaries of DunBroch residents of old. She felt proud that it wasn't just full of leather-bound books for show, like some houses' libraries were. Hiccup admired the fixtures—they even had one of those ladders on wheels, which was awesome—as she went to a desk near one of the windows (how old was that glass?) and sat.

\_DunBroch\_, she printed in clear capitals, putting down the mailing address and the landline. Then she jotted her mobile number, e-mail address, and Skype handle. She wondered if that seemed desperate, but then he leaned over her shoulder to see what she'd written. "Oh, good idea." Apparently not, then.

She slid a piece of paper and pen over to him so he could put down his details. "I got you this as well," she said a bit shyly, handing him the tablet. "The pinnacle of Scottish confectionery."

He unwrapped a corner and broke off a piece. It was almost the consistency of fudge, but it tasted like brown sugar and cream. "That's good. Really, really sweet, but good." He put a bigger piece in his mouth and let it melt on his tongue while he wrote down his contact info. Without meaning to he started doodling on the side of the paper, a high stone tower with a curly-haired girl at the top and a hawk wheeling overhead.

"Doing stuff like that makes it hard to say goodbye to you," she said, not a hint of teasing in her voice, though she tried to smile.

He turned scarlet. "Now you have something to remember me by."

There was little chance she'd be forgetting him anytime soon, not the lad who understood her dream of flying and freedom. There had to be something she could give him that would last longer than a sweetie. She twirled a lock of hair around her finger as she thought, and smiled slowly when it came to her.

He watched as she reached up to the tartan bow at the top of her head and tried not to get too distracted by the way her shirt rode up over her stomach as she moved. Ever so delicately she pulled at the trailing ends of the bow and it came undone, almost in slow motion. Hiccup felt like he was in one of those Regency romances that girls were supposed to find both sexy and romantic. It made sense now, because the anticipation coupled with the look in her eye were going to kill him.

She shook her hair out and ran one hand through it, then stood in front of him and held up the ribbon. Instead of just handing it to him she thought for a second, looking down. She wanted to tie it on so it wouldn't get lost, but if she put it around his wrist they'd all see it, and she wanted it to be just between the two of them, unbearably soppy as that was. His hand twitched at his pocket, revealing a belt loop, and she grinned devilishly.

Hiccup stopped breathing as she pulled up the hem of his shirt. She carefully and ridiculously slowly threaded the ribbon through the belt loop, knotting it securely before tying a bow. Then she gazed up at him through her eyelashes, her hands still brushing against his stomach. He sucked in a breath and pulled her close as slowly as he could, pausing when their noses brushed and her eyes fluttered shut. Then he kissed her until her knees went weak.

In between kisses she said, "We should have done this part first."

"Yeah, but then we never would have gotten to the phone numbers and stuff." He nuzzled her ear. "I need that stuff."



"Well, I need this stuff." She combed her fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck and he shivered, eyes dark as he kissed her neck in retaliation. "Hiccup," she gasped, and then the phone on the desk rang once.

The sudden noise startled them apart. Merida glared at the phone until something clicked in her head. "They're coming."

"Who? What?" His head felt cloudy, from lust or lack of oxygen or the intoxicating effect her presence had on him or all three.

"One of the boys called to warn us," she said, stepping back and trying to straighten her hair. His was more obviously mussed, though, and she smiled fondly. "Your hair's in a right state."

He raised his hands to try to fix it, saying, "I wonder whose fault that is." At the sardonic glint in his eyes she had to give him one more kiss, arms wrapped around his middle. She backed away before he had the chance to drop his hands around her.

"Don't forget your paper," she said, crossing toward the door. He groped for it on the desk behind him as he watched her walk away, sure that she was wiggling her hips just to torture him.

"No chance."

She swung the door open to Fergus' fist raised to knock. "Hi, Dad," she said brightly, as if they had actually been looking for a book, the way he'd suggested, and not snogging madly. It was probably too much to hope that she didn't look as ravished as she felt. Her dad didn't mention anything, though that could have just been out of embarrassment.

"The lads are here. They want to say goodbye before they go."

She stifled the groan but couldn't stop the huff. Trust the others to get between her and a nice goodbye with Hiccup. "Alright."

Her dad peered past her. "And your dad's looking to get a move on as well, Hiccup."

"Yes, sir."

The kitchen was crowded with her family and the chieftains' as well. The lords were deep in conversation with Stoick and the triplets were getting ready to launch a spoonful of whipped cream at Rob's back. Merida stole the spoon as she passed. They grumbled, their plan foiled.

"Did you find that book, Merida?" Hamish asked loudly.

"No, we didn't manage to locate it. I'll have a look around later, and I'll send you pictures if I find anything, okay, Hiccup?" she asked, licking a bit of whipped cream off of the spoon as she looked at him.

He swallowed thickly, but he was pretty sure the noise he made passed for an affirmative. The triplets pretended to gag.

The other families filed by on their way out. "Lovely seeing you as usual, Merida," Lord Dingwall said.

"And you. Safe travels."

"Bye, Merida. Come and see us if you get the chance."

"Thanks, Lachie. Don't work too hard."

"Bye, Merida."

"Bye, Rob. Thanks for coming, Lord MacGuffin, Lady MacGuffin."

"Take care, lass."

"You're always welcome at ours, you know."

"Yes, my lady. Thank you."

"See you around, princess."

"Be still my heart."

"Merida, dear, you simply must come see us sometime soon. I've been longing to have you."

"Thank you, my lady, that's so kind of you." And never going to happen.

Finally they were all gone. "Time for us as well, son," Stoick said. "Elinor, Fergus, you've been very kind."

"It was our pleasure," Elinor assured him.

"Aye, especially since you've just seen what we usually have to put up with." Elinor jabbed an elbow into his ribs. "Oh, love, you can't pretend it's not true." Merida giggled. She would always love her father for being so wonderfully himself.

"Thank you very much," Hiccup said to them. "For everything." He wasn't about to be more specific than that.

The Haddocks shook hands with the DunBrochs, but she wasn't ready to let him go. "I'll see you out," she offered, and they followed her through the great hall, the courtyard, and out the gate. She paused at the gate and he stopped with her, letting his dad stride ahead.

"Be careful," she said, not meeting his eyes. Feeling like this about someone she'd only known a few days was so stupid. He tipped her head up and kissed her gently. The sweetness of the tablet was still in his mouth, and she didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"I'll see you around," he said, smiling, and she watched him walk away, never once looking back.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Notes:<strong>

tablet/butter tablet/Scottish tablet = like fudge but not chocolate; recipes vary but it's generally made with butter, sugar, milk or cream or condensed milk or some combination thereof, and sometimes vanilla, whisky, or other flavorings

coo = Scots dialect for cow

"Flower of Scotland" = not Scotland's official anthem, but its unofficial oneâ€”the one they sing before the football and the rugby

## 7. Chapter 7

artemis alba: are you home?

>nightfury: yep. back in our very own castle.<br>artemis alba: wanker  
x

\* \* \*

><p>"I almost got fired today."<p>

"Why, what happened?"

"Some drunk bastard wouldn't take no for an answer and grabbed me. Put his hands all over my arse and said nasty things." At the time she'd been white-hot with wrath, ripping herself out of his grasp and spouting invective. Some of the regulars had escorted the man out but that hadn't stopped her shouting. She'd tried to follow him out, ready to give him a proper kicking; it took the combined threat of losing her job and getting arrested to stop her. Luckily Jamie hadn't been there to try to defend her honor. He definitely would have tried, and if that had been the case one of them would definitely be in jail now; the only question was which one of them, the bastard or Jamie or her, it would be.

Now that she was in her flat, showered and in her pajamas, she felt less anger and more ickiness. She'd thought about calling home to talk to her parentsâ€”not to tell them, just to chat for a bitâ€”but they'd know something was wrong and they'd get the story out of her and her dad would start yelling about coming down and sorting the bastard out and her mum would fret about her safety. What she wanted was someone who would listen without trying to fix anything, and who would say something to make her feel better. With that in mind it was easy enough to know who to call.

"Are you okay?" He sounded concerned but calm, his voice warm.

"I'm fine." She sat cross-legged on her bed, wondering distantly where he was, what his room looked like, what he'd been doing when she called. Thinking of him meant that she couldn't think of the bastard; that was exactly what she needed. "I shouldn't have shouted at him, or threatened him, but he didn't pay any attention when I asked politely."

"I'd say you did the right thing, then. I'd offer to come down and kick the guy's ass for you, but we both know you'd do a better job of it yourself."

"It's true."

"You're really alright, though, aren't you?"

"The bastard has been banned and I am really-really alright. Anything interesting happen up there recently?" He launched into a story about his dog Toothless and she snuggled into bed, soothed by the sound of his voice.

When she started yawning loud enough for him to hear he said dryly, "Sorry to bore you."

"You should be. Would I have called if I didn't want to listen to you talk?"

"In some conversations both people talk."

"I already did my bit. It's your turn."

"Judging by your reaction, I've exhausted my store of scintillating anecdotes for the night. You should go to bed."

"I'm already there." The image that the idea of her in bed conjured in his mind's eye was going to feature in his dreams later on.

"Then you should hang up the phone and go to sleep."

She yawned again and he could just make out an "Alright" in the midst of it. "Thank you, Hiccup."

"What for?"

"Just in general."

"Okay then. You're welcome." He hesitated, wanting to say something else but not sure what it was. Finally he gave up thinking and said, "Night, Merida."

"Sweet dreams, Hiccup," she murmured.

\* \* \*

><p>nightfury: you didn't happen to actually find those books about the castle, did you? because I really am interested in seeing what they have to say.<br>artemis alba: you sure know how to make a girl feel special<br>>nightfury: I thought you knew I was just using you for your house.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>Berk had what seemed like nine months of winter, with a month each of spring and fall bracketing a few short weeks of summer. Summer made up for its brevity by being intense, long hot days under metallic blue skies and short nights cooled by sea breeze. Hiccup and Toothless spent as much time as they could outdoors, mostly on the woodland trail up around Raven Point. He let Toothless bound ahead of him, careening off tree trunks, sniffing foliage, peering after small creatures as they skittered away through the underbrush, fleeing the terrible beast with the wide eyes and lolling tongue. The woods smelled alive, like dirt and water and sunlight and leaves. He wished

he could bottle the scent and send it to Merida; this was his home. Toothless scrambled over a log, claws gouging through the moss, and Hiccup followed. He was proud of his wild island, the forest around him all pulsing with life. She'd like it here, of that he had no doubt.<p>

"Hiccup!" He turned, slowly, trying to convince himself that it was some other girl calling his name. It'd been months since he'd seen her, and he wasn't sure how he'd managed to be so luckyâ€"Berk was a small city, after all. But there she was, in a sports bra and running shorts, smiling cautiously.

"Hey, Astrid." Toothless flopped to the ground at his feet.

"Hi, Toothless," she said, and he rolled his eyes up to look at her, but stayed silent. It was just one step up from him totally ignoring her, and apparently she remembered that, given the way her smile faltered. She looked back up at Hiccup instead. "It's been a while. How are you?"

"Good. You?"

"Great. How's your dad?"

He narrowed his eyes slightly. Maybe she was just trying to be polite. "Same as always. Fantasy camp starts next week, so he's busy with that."

"Do you have to help with it again?"

"I actually volunteered this year." Fantasy camp, when middle-aged wannabes paid to run around the stadium, was usually good for a laugh, especially when Dad got out there with them and showed them why it was nicknamed the Kill Ring. At the very least the participants went away with a new understanding of the game, and nobody had sued them yet, so it was all good.

"How was school this year?"

"Fine. All my gen eds are out of the way and I've started actual degree work, so..."

"Same here." She was studying biology and kinesiology. He'd once joked that she just wanted to learn the most efficient ways to hurt someone, and she'd smiled in response, eyes glinting steely. Oh, and she took krav maga and taught kickboxing. If Berk had a fight club, she'd be in itâ€"she'd be running itâ€"kicking ass and taking names. She was a complete badass and a big cuddler. His first relationship had been both extremely mystifying and deeply illuminating, for all that it had been vaguely defined.

"You look good," she said now, and he didn't miss the way her eyes skated over him. It made him glad he hadn't taken off his tank top yet, no matter how warm it was. He didn't think he looked any different from the last time she'd seen him, when she dumped him. Maybe more tan and stubbled at this particular moment, but mostly the same.

He felt different, though. He didn't think he could feel anything but, not when he'd left at least part of his heart in the Highlands,

and not when he was willing to admit things like that to himself. All at once he realized that he didn't regret anything that had happened between them, not even that Astrid had dropped him. Oh, he remembered how it had felt; he hadn't wanted to leave the house, and if Stoick hadn't made him he wouldn't have. There wasn't enough money in the world that would convince him to relive those weeks of feeling rejected and unloved, but if she hadn't let him go, he might not know Merida now. He couldn't be too mad about anything that led up to her.

Now he wasn't sure what he was supposed to say to Astrid. He was probably supposed to return the compliment. It would be true enough; she looked as good as ever, confident and toned and glowing like a winter sunbeam. Even standing still he felt clumsy next to her. The words "You too" wouldn't make it past his lips, though. "Uh, thanks," he said eventually.

"We should go out sometime," she said. "Get a drink or coffee and catch up." It sounded like the first time she'd asked him out, the command subtle but still evident. He'd been too confused to say no then.

But what was there for them to catch up on? They didn't have much in common, and when it came to current events, his big story was that he was...involved with someone else. If he tried to explain it, that they'd kissed a lot one weekend and since then had been talking pretty frequently and she was getting to be more important to him than anyone who wasn't family, he'd only sound awkward.

"I don't think so," he said carefully, eyebrows twitching together, apologetic in spite of himself. She cocked her head and looked at him. She didn't look offended, just speculative, her eyes on his. All the things he'd felt about and because of her had long since faded, the rejection and anger and self-pity and reflexive guilt despite the big fat nothing he'd done wrong. And he felt no need to hang out with her.

"Your loss," she said, shrugging.

\_Not really\_, he thought as she jogged away.

\* \* \*

><p>"You sound preoccupied."<p>

"Sorry. I just ran into someone today that I wasn't prepared to see."

"Oh yeah? Who was it?"

"Um...a girl I kind of used to go out with."

"An ex?" That was intriguing. She wouldn't say there wasn't a tiny tickle of what might be jealousy in there as well.

"I'm not exactly sure we were ever really boyfriend and girlfriend, but yeah. My one ex."

Hearing that there had only been one made her feel sort ofâ€¦triumphant. "I have mixed feelings about this girl," she

said.

"Really."

"Yes. On one hand, she's an idiot if she let you go, but on the other, if she's the one who taught you to kiss like that, then I owe her a thank you." It was when she said things like that that he really wondered what they were. Just friends, who'd made out in the past and would probably do so again if given the opportunity? Okay, but just-friends didn't say things like "She's an idiot if she let you go," did they? He had more than a suspicion that they weren't just friends.

"You know, if I emptied my bank account and left now I could be there in oh, maybe three days."

She chuckled. "We could meet halfway."

"I think halfway's in the middle of the ocean." The door slammed downstairs, announcing the arrival of his father and dinner. "I gotta go, sorry."

"No worries. Bye."

Later he e-mailed a picture of a doodle, the two of them in a boat, miles from anything and surrounded by sharks and busy snogging.

\* \* \*

><p>How had people lived before internet video calling? She'd now seen his room—he'd blushed at the pile of dirty clothes on the floor—and the view out of the window. Mostly she was happy just to see him again.<p>

Now her view of him was obscured by the huge furry black thing in front of him. "Hiccup, I don't think that's a dog at all."

The alleged dog had its front paws on the table in front of the laptop and was watching her curiously with strange greenish eyes. His nostrils widened and she heard him snort.

"Of course he's a dog. What else would he be?"

"I don't know. A small bear? A luck dragon, like in \_The NeverEnding Story\_, but black?"

Behind the dog's head he laughed. "I think you may be right," he said, scratching one of Toothless' ears.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance," Merida said formally. Toothless cocked his head in reply, ears pricked up. Hiccup grinned. It probably would have sounded stupid, but it was important that the two of them like each other. He hadn't been worried, but they were getting along great so far. "This may be an impertinent question, but what kind of dog are you?"

"The best kind, obviously," Hiccup answered for Toothless. "What breed he is no one knows for sure. He found me a couple of years ago and we've been best buds ever since."

"He found you?" she asked, smiling indulgently.

"Yeah. I was the one who was lost. But not anymore, right, Toothless?" The dog actually nodded, looking for all the world like he understood what Hiccup said.

"Maybe he's a reverse werewolf," she suggested. "Dog most of the month but human during the full moon."

"I'm pretty sure I would have noticed a large naked man roaming around the house every month."

Unfortunately that was the moment that his dad chose to call out "Hiccup?" Merida laughed so hard she snorted, tears running down her cheeks.

"In here, Dad," he answered over her chortling.

Stoick peeked around the doorframe into the room. "Toothless, get down," he scolded, and Hiccup nudged him away from the tabletop. When Toothless had sauntered away Stoick noticed the laughing girl on the computer screen. "Oh, you're talking."

"Hullo, Mr. Haddock," Merida said, waving and wiping tears from her eyes.

"Hi, Merida. You alright?"

"Yes, sir. Something just struck me funny."

"Okay." Luckily for all of them he didn't ask what. "How's your family?"

"Very well, thank you. I'll tell them you asked."

He nodded and then turned to Hiccup. "Gobber's coming over with pizza in a bit."

"Okay, thanks. No green pepper?"

"No green pepper. I'll call you when he's here. Bye, Merida."

"Bye." When he was gone she said, "I love my dad, but I think yours has cooler friends."

"I'll make sure to tell them that. I'm just glad he has a friend, you know? So he's not just working all the time. Even if it is just Gobber and they eat pizza and drink beer and watch dumb action movies. If I have to watch Thor one more time..."

She reared back, gasping. "You don't like Thor?"

"I like Darcy and Sif," he offered, shrugging.

Merida shook her head seriously. "I don't know if this is going to work out if you don't like action movies."

"Action movies are all about how the huge buff guy saves the world and gets the girl. How am I supposed to compete with guys like that? I need movies where the awkward guy gets the girl, to give me some



hope."

"Why do you need hope?" she asked, like he was missing something obvious. "You've got me."

"Yeah, but as what?" He hadn't really meant her to hear it, but now that she had, he was pretty interested in the answer.

"As whatever you want." She hitched one shoulder up. They hadn't ever talked about it, but it seemed pretty obvious to her that he wasn't just a couple of kisses and some banter. She was reasonably sure he felt the same way about her, but she'd leave it up to him to say. Which he would. Any minute now.

He stared at her face on the screen, simultaneously thankful for technology and cursing the fact that he could see her but not touch her. "One day," he swore, face more serious than she'd ever seen it before. "We'll be able to go on a real date. Not that I didn't thoroughly enjoy our previous encounters, but I want to be able to go somewhere that we don't have to hide." Then he smiled, the half-smile that made her heart melt. "I might even sit through a dumb action movie for you."

She hugged her arms around herself, trying and failing to pretend that they were his. "I wish you were here."

"You and me both."

From outside his room they heard the door slam and Gobber's voice announcing the arrival of pizza. "Go eat," she said. "I'll talk to you later."

"Okay. But, Merida, I promise. Soon."

She nodded. "Bye."

When he checked his phone before he went to bed there was a text from her.

><em>I decided that you probably shouldn't waste your money taking me to see an action movie. I'd be so busy kissing you that I'd miss the whole thing, and then we'd just have to watch it again later.  
xx<em>

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Notes:<strong>

Artemis = Greek goddess of the hunt, the moon, and virginity, among other things; she's most often depicted as an archer. Wikipedia says this: "As a virgin, Artemis had interested many gods and men, but only her hunting companion, Orion, won her heart"â€"go forth and fic that, yo.

Alba = Gaelic name for Scotland

Artemis is in some places called "Artemis Agrotera," and the title and its alliteration inspired Merida's screen name.

"Have you ever had haggis?"

"Of course. It's really not as bad as people make it out to be."

"Oh, my big brave man."

He blushed at her teasing. "Yeah, we'll see how much you laugh when you try some of our specialties up here, like fermented shark."

"Eugh." She shuddered. "That sounds disgusting."

"See? You gotta be tough to make it in Berk." Hiccup raised one arm and flexed his bicep. By the look on his face he didn't think the muscle was that impressive and he wasn't expecting her to think so either. Though he wasn't as muscular as his dad or hers, she knew how strong his arms were and how tightly they could hold her. And by this point he couldn't possibly believe that she would prefer a man with huge muscles to the one on her computer screen with the sardonic smile and raised eyebrow.

That didn't mean she wanted to eat his manky leftover shark, specialty or not. She grimaced at him across the miles. "I don't know if I want to come to Berk if you're going to make me eat rotten fish."

"Oh, you want to come to Berk." His face was animated as he leaned forward to describe his home: the ancient Viking village with its recreated wooden longhouses, the stadium where the Hooligans played and Stoick worked, Gobber's shop and the strange pieces of "art" he created in his spare time, the midsummer bonfires when the flames and the full moon made it bright as day for the entire population of the island to party all night, the high cliffs over the sea with the rocks that looked like sentinels standing guard at the mouth of the harbor, the mossy trees that filled the forest, the little valley in the middle of the woods that was his and Toothless' hiding place. She'd looked at pictures online, but as he spoke she could really see it. The tree trunks would be the color of his hair and the canopy overhead the color of his eyes and there'd be a salt breeze blowing over her skin. It sounded wild and thrilling. It sounded like a place she could love—never as much as Scotland, but a place she could be herself without having to be a young lady, and a place that could feel a little like home. She wanted desperately to see it, to see what had made him.

\* \* \*

><p>artemis alba: I don't miss you at all<br>artemis alba: for a minute I thought I did but I was wrong

>nightfury: that's too bad. I miss you.<br>artemis alba: ugh, I was just trying to convince myself and now you've gone and ruined it

>nightfury: sorry. but I do miss you.<br>artemis alba: i miss you too

>artemis alba: a lot xx<br>nightfury: what's with the Xs?

>artemis alba: they're kisses<br>artemis alba: like in xoxo

>nightfury: oh.<br>nightfury: well in that case xxxxx

\* \* \*

><p>Elinor asked about work and her friends and then added, "And how's Hiccup?"<p>

Merida did her best not to sigh like an angsty teenager. "He's hundreds of miles away. Other than that, he's fine."

"It sounds like things between you two have gotten quite serious."

"As serious as they can get from hundreds of miles away." And they would be a hell of a lot more serious if he was around. Thoughts of him, his hands and his smile and his way of saying something she'd never expect, were constantly distracting her as she went about her day, to say nothing of at night. She couldn't imagine that if he was here she'd be any more preoccupied than she was now, though on the other hand, if he was here, she'd be spending a lot of time with him anyway.

Not that she'd tell her mum any of that.

Her mum noted ever so helpfully, "Absence does make the heart grow fonder, as they say."

Merida groaned. "I wish whoever'd first said that wasn't dead so I could give them a smack." She sat silent for a minute, thinking. "Mum, I don't know what to do. I hate not being in the same place as him."

"You could move," she suggested. By her tone it was evident that she knew that would never happen, though. Scotland was Merida's home. It was part of her soul. If she wasn't in Scotland, she didn't know who or what she'd be.

"Or you could convince him to move." That wouldn't be fair, either. If she wouldn't go, she couldn't ask him to leave his home, especially not when so little time had passed. "Or you could break it off with him."

"No." The ferocity of her response took even Merida aback. Giving him up wasn't an option. Sure, it had crossed her mind before—the distance was a drawback, and she'd never in her life felt more lonely than she did without him nearby. As bad as she felt being away from him, she knew that she'd feel far worse if she couldn't talk to him anymore, hear the smile in his voice when he said her name or the way it dropped late at night. She didn't think she really could give him up.

"You could marry him," Elinor said.

"Uh, no, I couldn't." \_Yes, you could\_, a voice in her head whispered; \_no, I can't\_, she hissed back. "I'm not ready. I've got things to do. I've got to finish school and get arrested at a protest and backpack through Europe first." Her mum muttered about how she didn't really have to do some of those things as Merida went on, "Besides, it's not like with you and Dad, where you met and just knew you were meant to be together."

Her mum laughed incredulously. "Is that what you think happened? I don't know what gave you that impression."

"You're perfect for each other. You still act like teenagers around each other, it's disgusting. And neither of you talk about other people you dated."

"That doesn't mean there weren't any; it just means that none of them matter anymore. When I met your father..."

"What happened?"

Elinor's tone was fondly exasperated. "I was meant to be on a blind date when this big hulk of a rugby player bumped into me and spilled my tea all over my blouse. He apologized and offered to buy me a new one—a tea, not a blouse, though I'm sure he would've bought me a new one of those as well. Of course I had to go home and change, so I missed my date."

"And?" Merida wasn't sure how she'd never heard this story before; maybe she'd never asked, just assumed that they'd been together since birth, as that was how it seemed to her.

"And the next few nights I went back to the same café to try to see the rugby player again," she admitted, sounding sheepish.

"Mum!"

"I wanted to apologize. I'm afraid I'd been a bit rude to him before. And he was rather handsome. I went there every night for a week before I saw him again."

"You stalked him!" Merida accused gleefully.

"I did not!"

"Yes, you did."

"I certainly did not. How else was I supposed to meet him? This was in the days before the internet, when you couldn't just look online and find out someone's whole life. All I knew was that he'd been in that café and he played rugby. I didn't even know his name. I thought I did very well with what I had," she said indignantly.

"Yes, Mum. You were a regular Sherlock Holmes."

Her mum huffed before she went on. "On the last night, a week later, I'd made up my mind that if he wasn't there I'd give up. I went in and had my tea and studied, for hours longer than I ever stayed, but he didn't show up. Just as I was leaving he came in." She paused dramatically. "With another girl."

"No!" Merida gasped.

"Yes. I went up to him and apologized for being rude and left with my head held high, but I was rather disappointed."

"Did you at least find out his name that time?"

"Yes. But I convinced myself that he was nothing but a stupid rugby-playing philanderer and that I didn't want anything to do with him. Then I started to hear things about him—you know how once you notice something one place, you notice it everywhere? I heard about how good Fergus DunBroch was at sport and how he told the best stories, but also how hard he worked and how kindly he treated others. Then one day I was in the library and he appeared out of nowhere and said," here she imitated Fergus' voice, "'I've been lookin' for ye everywhere, lass. Ye're harder t' find than Nessie herself.' I'd dropped some of my notes in the café and he'd found them and had been trying to return them. Then he said, 'I don' suppose ye'd like to have dinner wi' me?' I couldn't very well say no, not when he looked so sheepish and lovely."

"What about the other girl?"

"She was a classmate of his, but that was the only time they ever did anything together. I certainly never saw her again." Merida was willing to bet that her dad had never seen her again either.

"And how long did it take before you knew you wanted to get married?"

"Oh, you know your father; it didn't take him long at all. I refused to even consider it until after I'd graduated. My parents took me off to Italy and France so I could see all the art I'd studied in person, so we didn't talk much, though he sent some letters that summer."

"\_He\_ sent letters?" Her dad's e-mails were full of jokes and not much sense of grammar; she couldn't imagine him filling long pages with the kinds of things that would win a woman's heart.

"Yes. I still have all of them." She could tell her mum was smiling at the other end of the line, remembering wandering through the museums of Rome and Paris and then returning to her hotel to find a letter postmarked Scotland, whose words couldn't have been as beautiful as the things she'd seen but which would have been no less dear to her. "And when we got off of the plane he was there waiting with a big bunch of flowers."

"Did he propose then?"

"Not right away. He waited a bit longer. He had been planning a special night, but I was in the middle of telling him about \_The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa\_ at lunch one day and he blurted it out. And I said of course."

It still seemed like it'd been so easy for them, despite her mum's shirt getting stained. She must have sighed, because Elinor went on, soothing and maternally prescient.

"Darling, I know that you are not me, or your father. You are your own person following your own path. When you fall in love, you'll know it—you of all people will know it. You throw yourself wholeheartedly into everything you care about; it'll be no different with the love of your life."

Long after they'd said goodbye Merida lay staring at the ceiling, thinking over what her mum said. She seemed so sure that Merida would

just somehow \_know\_, and that was hard for her to believe. But she had a good point about her daughter's habits. Elinor had said "wholeheartedly" when she really meant "with blind, stubborn, bloody-minded intensity." Merida wasn't there yet with him, that was clear. But just because she wasn't certain now didn't mean she wouldn't be in the future. Maybe she wasn't in love with him, but she could be, soon.

\* \* \*

><p>Every year it was the same: he woke up way too early to Gobber's singing, so bad it was almost good, and his dad frying something for breakfast. When they'd eaten they headed out to the clearing at the end of the woodland trail, the site overlooking the sea. They cleared the ring, replaced any missing stones, and helped stack wood for the bonfire. Most places had their bonfires on Midsummer's Eve in June, but Berk had to be different and have theirs later. It wasn't even a Midsummer celebration, as they'd all learned in elementary school; it was the memorial of a long-ago Viking battle against an enemy called the Red Death. There were different versions of and ideas about what the Red Death had been: current scholarly thought held that it was a sickness, like the Black Plague; some said it was an invasion by other, fiercer Vikings, or maybe Celts, attacking en masse; but the most common explanation was that it was a dragon of enormous size. That was the version Gobber swore by, but Gobber also believed that trolls lived in people's laundry rooms and stole their left socks. The whole dragon thing sounded pretty Beowulf-y to Hiccup, especially how there were no good corroborating accounts of the battle, just a famous epic poem. No matter how analytically he thought of it, though, how he scoffed at the idea of dragons and knew that oral tradition was subjective and not trustworthy, he loved the bonfire, the singing, the sense of community. When they lit the pyre he felt invincible and any doubts he had disappeared into the smoke. Whether it had been a monstrous creature or a foreign army or a virus they had beaten it, the people of Berk all those centuries ago, and they could do it again.<p>

Even as they prepared there was a jubilant atmosphere. People laughed and sang and passed around clear, powerful alcohol at lunchtime, drinking straight from the bottle as they sat at the long wooden tables. Hiccup accepted the bottle one of the Hooligans handed him and drank without a second thought: it was bonfire day, and everyone knew that on bonfire day you drank dragonbreath. The urban legends about the guy who drank too much of it and went blind, or the one who stood too close to the bonfire and not-so-spontaneously combusted, weren't true, but everyone knew to keep their bottles well away from the fire.

As the afternoon wore on more people, mostly women and many of them young, joined them. They carried armfuls of flowers and trailing boughs of greenery. Some of the leafy branches went around the base of the fire, while the daisies and buttercups and ivy and small roses went into wreaths for the girls to wear on their headsâ€”they were celebrating the most badass event in Berk's history, but also the triumph that led to the island's rebirth, and the crowns symbolized that new era of peace and plenty. Besides, no one in Berk would ever dare to suggest that you couldn't be a badass and look pretty at the same time. There were always at least a few bonfire babies every spring because of the combination of flowers, moonlight, bonfire and dragonbreath.

In the evening grills burst into life and the smell of burgers and steaks and sausages filled the air. Stoick and Gobber nearly burned their beards off, as usual, arguing over the lighter fluid, and Hiccup laughed until tears filled his eyes watching them. They grumbled at each other through mouthfuls of grilled meat washed down with gulps of ale. "No fighting on bonfire night, Dads," Hiccup reprimanded them, smirking as they both glared at him briefly before Stoick handed Gobber another beer. Hiccup broke a sausage and a burger apart onto a plate and slid it under the table to Toothless.

The band emerged when most people had finished eating. People leapt from their benches to dance, whooping as the drums pounded and the fiddles squealed. Hiccup watched, sipping at a bottle of water—he'd never been much for dancing, even before the accident. Being down a leg didn't stop Gobber from stomping through a dance or two, though. When the sun finally started to go down the music stopped as they took torches to the stack of wood. As the lowest bits started blazing people jumped over it, for luck and to prove their mettle.

It was hard not to think of her then, because she would be having the time of her life. If she were here she'd be the first in line to jump over the fire, never mind that traditionally it was the boys who jumped. She'd soar just above the flames like an action hero, hair the same color as the fire and wreath of flowers firmly on her head. She would dance and drink and roar with laughter and give him kisses whose enthusiasm could be excused as the high spirits of bonfire night. Instead of feeling melancholy that she wasn't there, he felt restless and full of anticipation. One day, he knew, he would bring her here and celebrate with her. He would explain the epic to her and join in the dance around the fire with her holding tight to his hand, and then he'd stare at her, his wild, bright girl, glowing in the firelight, smiling only at him, no matter who else tried to tempt her away. It would happen, one day. Anyone else would say that what he'd imagined was just wishful thinking, but he knew it wasn't; it was certainty.

The night passed in singing and talking and drinking. Hiccup walked Toothless around the fire and into the woods so they could both get away from the fire for a few minutes; they avoided the darkest bits of underbrush, and especially the ones that had giggles coming from them. When they came back Stoick was talking to old Gothi, who nodded as she listened. Stoick wrapped his thick arm around Hiccup's shoulders as he continued to talk. Dad's arm was warm and heavy, and he smelled of smoke; it was comforting, rather than oppressive. Hiccup stared into the flames and Toothless settled down at their feet. When she rose to leave Gothi put her gnarled hand on his head and smiled down at him. He closed his eyes as she waved a cupped hand from the fire toward him. He could feel a rush of heat flow over him at the old woman's blessing. She moved on at a stately waddle and Stoick's arm squeezed around Hiccup briefly before releasing him.

As the sun slipped over the horizon, gilding the edge of the water, everyone still awake started to sing the end of the epic. It was the part when the Hero awoke the morning after the Red Death had been defeated, and he saw for the first time that they had won.

\_We live once more to see the sun sail the sky; \_  
><em>We live beyond the bounds of the Death.<em>

><em>Together we fell, together we fought,<em>  
><em>Together we greet a new world on its first day. <em>

He wouldn't deny that he got chills. Not for the first time he wished they knew more about the Hero. Even his name had been lost or forgotten; or maybe, he'd thought more than one morning, singing the words about their communal victory, the Hero hadn't wanted his name to be remembered. Maybe he'd just been happy that his people had survived and were rid of the threat against them. All the epic said was that he was a Viking unlike any other, and if Hiccup's private theory was right, it must have been true.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Note:<strong>

Red Death sounds way more hardcore than Green Death.

## 9. Chapter 9

One more after this!

\* \* \*

><p>The Falconer didn't usually get many amorous couples. It wasn't the most romantic establishment in Edinburgh, after all, just a run-of-the-mill pub. Occasionally, though, some loved-up pair found their way there and proceeded to inspire decidedly non-amorous feelings in Merida. Usually she viewed such couples with mild disdain to outright contempt, depending on how disgustingly soppy and/or overly affectionate they were being, but sometimes she watched them share smiles and kisses and felt lonely. Tonight there was a couple in with some of their other mates. Eventually the friends moved away and left the pair of them staring into each others' eyes, murmuring low, and something more than jealousy but less than complete emptiness split her gut. It wasn't fair that they got to be together when she was separated from Hiccup. That could be them— that should be them, her stealing kisses over their pints, him sneaking his hand onto her knee, and she knew it would be them, if only Berk wasn't so bloody far away.

By the time her shift had ended she'd felt a curious mixture of sadness and indignation over the injustice of it and plain lust. Jamie had taken one look at her and put down the bottle he'd only just got in order to walk her home. For once she was glad to have him there. The way she felt she might've started a fight or taken off to climb Arthur's Seat in the dark or done something else totally irrational with her nervous energy. As it was he'd followed her as she walked quickly back to hers, all her thoughts on Hiccup.

She had to hear his voice. She needed at least that; she'd never get to sleep if she didn't calm down, and he was usually good for that. It might have the opposite effect tonight, though.

"Thank you, Jamie," she said, distractedly, when she reached her door.

"Oh! Didn't think you'd noticed me. No worries, princess." He stared up at her from the bottom of the steps, frowning just a little, until



she twitched under his gaze. "Erm...you alright?"

"Fine. Just thinking."

"About your lad from up north?"

It was her turn to frown. How did he know about that? She hadn't said anything, and she was fairly certain her mum wouldn't have mentioned it to Jamie's mum.

He shrugged. "You were different than usual that weekend. We saw you talking to him a couple times, and he was there when we came to say goodbye; it wasn't hard to put two and two together. What's his name again?"

She hoped by "we" he meant him and the other lads, not him and his parents. "Why are you so interested?" He could only want to take the piss, especially when he heard Hiccup's name.

Jamie smiled, only a bit condescendingly. "We're friends, Merida. And you're acting bizarre right now, even for you. Your dad and my mum will kill me if anything happens to you. I'm too young and pretty to die just yet, so tell me what's going on."

Despite her funk she laughed at the way Jamie shook his hair out as he talked about being pretty.

"Don't laugh."

"You have my word."

"His name's Hiccup."

He really did try, she could tell; his mouth contorted with the effort of not laughing. "That's certainly unique. Family name, is it?"

"Laugh it up, Junior," she retorted. He'd hated being called James Junior when he was younger. It only now occurred to her that if she knew that about him, and he cared enough to abandon his beer to make sure she got home safely, they must be friends, like he said. She hadn't ever really thought of them that way, though now she felt thick for not realizing it. She smiled down at him, for the first time happy that their parents had forced them all to hang out together at every holiday. "Thanks," she said earnestly. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to go call my lad from up north."

Jamie winked. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Good night, Jamie."

"Night, Merida." Oddly, she felt less like buzzing out of her skin after talking to him. Next time he came in to the pub she'd buy him a beer to thank him, on the off chance he didn't do anything annoying between now and then.

\* \* \*

><p>He woke when his phone buzzed near his head. He'd been trying to stay awake until she got off work, but he'd nodded off in the middle

of an episode of "Modern Marvels." It was always her calling; no one else ever phoned him so late. "Hey," he said sleepily, stretching along the couch. "Did you just get home?" At least they were in the same time zone—he should be thankful for that much.<p>

Hiccup's voice was husky with sleep and it rasped against her every nerve. She tried to breathe normally, to speak properly. "Yeah. Don't worry, Jamie walked me."

She didn't sound at all tired; the opposite, really, her voice bright and quick. The name seemed vaguely familiar, though. He racked his memory to place it. "One of the guys from the games? His dad's a clan chief too?"

"Aye, the Macintosh. He hangs about the pub a lot."

"Should I be worried?"

He heard or maybe imagined the sound of her curls moving as she shook her head. "Definitely not. What you should be worried about is Gerard Butler coming in and sweeping me off my feet."

"He's welcome to you." She probably knew it wasn't true. If it came down to it, he'd put up a fight for her, but it wouldn't be pretty. "Which one is Jamie?"

"The one who thinks he's a rock star, with the hair and the tattoos."

"Right, the hair. He's got tattoos?"

"Yeah. From his shoulders all down to his biceps. I actually kind of like them, but I'll never tell him that. And mine's still better."

"Whoa, hold up." He scooted up the arm of the couch until he was nearly sitting. "You have a tattoo?"

"'Course I do. I'm a hellion, didn't you know?"

"What is it? No, wait, let me guess. Is it a rampant lion?"

She giggled. "No."

"Is it the Scottish flag?"

"Nope."

"Is it a thistle?"

"No."

"How close am I?"

"You're in the right general area."

"Is it Sean Connery's face?"

She laughed loudly. "I should have got that, but it's the clan crest. The dagger and knot."

He remembered it from the games. It would make a nice tattoo, he thought. He'd seen her in a tank top and in a skirt and hadn't seen any ink, which made him wonder: "Where is it?"

He remembered the curve of her calves as she danced, the graceful lines of her arms as she drew her bow, the milky skin of her stomach when her shirt rode up. None of what he'd seen had been tattooed. That meant that it was somewhere normally hidden by clothes. He'd be lying if he said he hadn't thought about those parts of her.

His voice had dropped to the low tone that sent shivers up her spine. Far away in Berk he was thinking of her, imagining her pale skin with a tattoo somewhere on it, a patch of skin he'd never seen bare before. Her heart thumped heavily and she blushed, even though he was miles away. She should probably tell him...or she could let him wonder. That seemed cruel, though, and more than a little dangerous. "It's on my right hip," she said, her own voice huskier than she intended.

"Maybe I'll get to see it someday." He couldn't believe the words actually came out of his mouth—he'd been thinking them, sure, but he hadn't meant for her to hear them. A hot flush spread across the back of his neck, both with embarrassment at blurting it out, her knowing now how he felt, what he wanted, how he thought of her, and with the desire itself.

"You'd be the first, apart from the girl who did it," she admitted.

Some of her friends in Edinburgh had been surprised when they learned that she'd never done the deed. She supposed she could have done it, but if she hadn't found anyone who interested her enough to kiss more than once, how could she be expected to have shagged someone? Things were different now, with him. She wouldn't regret it if he was her first. He would be gentle and shy, breath stuttering over her skin, fingertips skating down her bare back, lips latching onto her neck, encouraged by the way she panted his name and pulled him closer. Merida sat down suddenly, knees feeling wobbly.

"Yeah?" His voice was warm; in her mind's eye she saw his smile, sweet and wicked, and she swallowed hard before answering.

"Yeah."

"I'm looking forward to it."

The room was warm, but she broke out in goosebumps nonetheless. It was probably past time to move the conversation along. "What about you?" she asked lightly. "Any tattoos or piercings?"

He laughed. "Nah, none of that. Just freckles and scars." That wasn't any better, because now she was imagining him, all lithe and wiry and speckled, his green eyes dark. She gasped a little.

"I think I'd better go," she said weakly.

"You okay?"

"Fine. Grand. Talk to you later."

"Bye."

When her legs felt steady enough she wandered into the bathroom to take a much-needed cold shower.

\* \* \*

><p>artemis alba: what's the furthest from home you've been?<br>nightfury: DunBroch. you?  
>artemis alba: down to London<br>artemis alba: most of the good flying buttresses are in europe, right?  
>nightfury: pretty much all of them. the places with Gothic cathedralsâ€"France, Italy, Germany.<br>artemis alba: we should go see them  
>nightfury: like backpack around Europe looking at architecture?<br>artemis alba: yeah  
>nightfury: wouldn't that be boring for you?<br>artemis alba: not if I went with you. I like the way you explain things  
>artemis alba: especially your hands-on approach<br>artemis alba: besides, we wouldn't just do things you wanted to do  
>nightfury: I foresee lots of time spent in bars, learning how to make new drinks and hustling people at darts.<br>artemis alba: we'll have to pay for the drinks somehow  
>nightfury: true.<br>artemis alba: I'll have to work on my list of famous places I want to kiss you  
>artemis alba: so far it's just at the Eiffel Tower<br>nightfury: how disappointing. I was expecting more from you.  
>artemis alba: like yours is any better<br>nightfury: mine is foolproof.  
>artemis alba: what is it?<br>nightfury: you'll have to wait and see.  
  
>artemis alba: i don't want to wait<br>artemis alba: I want to go now  
  
>nightfury: give me a year to try and earn some money for this little expedition.<br>artemis alba: so next summer?  
>nightfury: has anyone ever told you you are the pushiest woman in the world?<br>artemis alba: you don't mind  
>nightfury: nah, not really.<br>artemis alba: xxxx

\* \* \*

><p>There was a large envelope in her box when she got home. It had been addressed to DunBroch and forwarded to her flat here, but it was stamped from Berk, and she went all gooey seeing her name in Hiccup's writing. She made herself wait until she was in her flat and curled up in her armchair before she slid her finger under the flap and pulled out the contents.<p>

It was a single large sheet of sketch paper, folded into quarters. She unfolded it carefully but curiously, no idea what it could be. The page was covered in drawings of towers. Some of them she recognized, like the Eiffel Tower and the Leaning Tower of Pisa and Big Ben's tower; others were from castles and palaces and cathedrals. The great tower at DunBroch was in one corner, and she was pretty sure one of them was Cinderella's castle from Disneyland. A whole big page of towers, thin spiky ones and thick rounded ones, all of them different and all drawn in his unmistakable bold, dark pencil strokes. She smiled. It was charming, though she wasn't quite sure

what to make of it.

Then at the very bottom of the page she saw the words that made it all make sense. It was his list, and he was right, it was foolproof. \_I want to kiss you at the top of every tower I climb\_.

\* \* \*

><p>"Your hair's getting long, laddie."<p>

"I don't know, I was thinking of growing it out, Fabio-style." She laughed. "Or maybe I'll shave it all off. How about that?"

Her expression was one of horrified puzzlement. "I don't know which one would be worse."

"They'd both be pretty bad, just in different ways. I'll go get it cut this week."

"Don't cut it too short. I like running my fingers through it." She bit her lip.

"I like it when you do that, too." They stared at each other stupidly for a moment, each smiling shyly.

"I think it's long enough that you could braid it now," she said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Try it."

"I'm not gonna braid my hair."

"Come on, just a tiny little one," she coaxed.

"What makes you think I even know how to braid?"

Merida raised an eyebrow, smiling saucily. Teasing him was too much fun. She leaned forward and purred, "Because I know that you're good with your hands."

He gulped. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

"Anyway, it's easy." Merida grabbed a section of hair and braided it quickly. "See?"

He squinted at the screen, nose wrinkled. "That looks no different from the rest of your hair."

"Piss off."

"No, really, I saw your hands moving, but it just looks exactly the same." He'd learned that she was kind of touchy about her hair, her relationship with it a combination of pride and frustration. It was a little bit of a low blow to make fun of her about it, and she agreed, glaring until he relented. Now he'd have to do it, to make her feel better. "This is the definition of being whipped," he muttered, clumsily sectioning out three clumps of hair.

"I feel so sorry for you."

"You should." She did her best not to laugh at the look of concentration on his face as he braided; his tongue poked out one corner of his mouth and his eyes rolled. "Ta da," he said, turning his head to display a small, short braid. He looked pleased with his achievement.

"Well done," she said, chuckling.

Stoick peeked around the door, though he knew full well who his son was talking to. Neither of them noticed him as they laughed. He rejoined Gobber in the kitchen.

"On the phone, I take it." Stoick nodded. "Good. More pie for us, then."

"It's my pie, freeloader."

"What's yours its mine, right?" Stoick rolled his eyes and set a plate and fork in front of Gobber as he sliced the pie deftly. "Do you think this girl will be around long enough for me to meet her? I'm curious about her."

Upstairs Hiccup laughed loudly; Stoick cocked his head to listen to the sound. Instead of answering Gobber's question he said, "Can you remember the last time he was this happy?"

Gobber nodded, sliding a slice onto Stoick's plate. "Aye. It was one leg and a mum ago."

"Exactly. I hope she's around for as long as he wants her to be." They ate in silence for a moment; Gobber watched his best friend thinking. When Stoick noticed he said, "You'd like her."

"So you do? Apart from the fact that she makes Hiccup happy."

Stoick nodded. "From the little I've seen of her, generally, yes. She loves her family, she's loyal, she's not afraid of a fight." Gobber knew him well enough to notice that Stoick's approval was not unconditional; there was something about her, or maybe just about the situation, that didn't sit right with him. For his part, Gobber had no qualms about being nosy.

"She'd fit right in up here, then. What's not to like?"

He stabbed an errant blueberry with more force than necessary. "I'm afraid she'll walk all over him."

"No, she won't."

"Yes, she will!"

"She won't. Not if she cares about him. And seeing as how they're always on the phone, she must care at least a bit." Stoick grumbled, not willing to give in to his friend just yet. "But even if she is some terrible maneater, I know Hiccup—you know Hiccup. He'll deal with whatever she throws him, and he'll be fine. He's not a little boy anymore, and he's stronger than we give him credit for."

Stoick knew he was right; sometimes it was hard for him to admit that his son had grown up, was no longer the wide-eyed child who'd clung to him. And he wasn't going to admit that Gobber was right. "Shut up and eat your pie," he said, and his best friend grinned.

\* \* \*

><p>A sheaf of papers lay on the table between them. All they needed was a signature. He already had the pen in his hand, but his dad wasn't quite ready to let him sign yet.<p>

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"It's a really good school, Dad. And it's now or never."

"It's not all about the school, though."

"No, not completely. But it's more about the school than it's not about the school. The other things are just a...bonus." He fought against the grin that threatened the seriousness of his words.

"I don't want you to get distracted. It's bad enough that you're taking Toothless..."

"Aw, you're just jealous that your clothes won't be all covered in dog hair anymore." Stoick was not amused, so Hiccup quickly reassured him. "I won't get distracted. Toothless will make sure I exercise, and I'll be less distracted there than I would up here." Probably, he added to himself. Hopefully.

Before his dad could protest further, Hiccup asked, "You don't really think I'm just doing this because of her, do you? 'Cause remember, we kind of had a similar conversation the first time I got accepted there." The part about whether or not he should leave home had been similar; now there was the added wrinkle of the long-distance girlfriend that he'd like to make the at-least-we're-in-the-same-country-now girlfriend.

"I remember. And I know it's not all because of her. But what if it turns out badly?" His father was watching him keenly, and Hiccup knew just how badly he thought it could turn out.

"Then I'll deal with it. Stuff is gonna turn out badly sometimes, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. I'd rather try and fail than sit around and succeed at not doing anything. If I get hurt..." He shrugged. "I'll still have you. And you'll still have me. Even if I'm not actually here, I'm still your son."

Stoick's gaze dropped to the table and he stared at it, hard, as if some secret knowledge was in the grain of the wood there. Hiccup waited to hear what his dad would say next. He was willing to listen if he had a good reason for him not to transfer, though it was going to get embarrassing if he had to try to convince his dad that he wasn't so hung up on her that he wouldn't be able to focus on school.

Stoick didn't want his son to get hurt, not any more than he'd already been. He remembered what Gobber had said about his son's strength and his ability to deal with whatever happened, though he hadn't mentioned how hard-headed Hiccup was. The time when Stoick

would have been able to stop his son from doing something had passed long ago; now all he could do was try to prepare Hiccup for what might come and hope for the best.

His dad looked up and smiled wearily. "Maybe you should invite her here for winter break."

That hadn't even cracked the list of things he expected his dad to say, but it was more welcome than almost all of them. It was him saying "I trust you" and "You're old enough to make your own decisions" and "I think you two will still be together in four months" and "I want you to be happy" all at once. Hiccup smiled, feeling almost faint with relief.

"I think that's a great idea, Dad."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Notes:<strong>

Arthur's Seat = a hill in Holyrood Park that's the highest point in Edinburgh. Merida could climb it in the dark easy peasy.

Hiccup's tattoo ideas are all symbols of Scotland. The rampant (standing up, with its front paws raised) lion is usually red on a yellow background; Scotland's flag is the St Andrew's Cross/Saltire, a white X on a blue background; the thistle is the national flower. And, y'know, Sean Connery.

In reality, the beginning of junior year is probably too late for Hiccup to transfer. Don't care.

There's a quarantine period for animals entering the UK that I have blissfully ignored.

## 10. Chapter 10

This is the last chapter, so I'd to thank everyone who read, reviewed, followed and/or favorited this, especially dov5e, hcsp1 and cilone. Thanks, guys! I hope you all enjoyed it as much as I did.

\* \* \*

><p>Another rainy evening in Edinburgh and she was behind the bar, wiping down glasses and putting them away. Custom was slow, but she didn't mind. The term had started; she hadn't talked to Hiccup in a few days because he'd been busy getting back to school as well. Even Jamie hadn't been in in a while. A week ago he'd led a girl in by the hand and stood up straight instead of leaning against the bar like he usually did.<p>

"Lexie, this is my friend Merida. Merida, this is Lexie." His eyes had been locked on the girl as they shook hands and Merida hid her grin. In all the time she'd known Jamie she'd never seen him look at anyone or anything the way he was looking at Lexie. It was really sweet, and not just because maybe it meant he would be lurking around and annoying her less.

"It's very nice to meet you," Merida had said earnestly as Lexie



smiled shyly, glancing up at Jamie. She'd give it a week or two before she told her mum, though.

Since then she'd hardly seen him. It had made things quieter, but it was also strangely lonely not having the tosser around. When the door opened she didn't turn; she just hoped that whoever it was coming in wasn't tracking dirty water all over the floor.

From behind her the customer asked, "Can I have a snakebite and black, please?"

She had to be hallucinating. The voice sounded familiar, from hours spent talking on the phone into the night. Merida turned, a pint glass in her hand, and nearly dropped it. "What are you doing here?"

Hiccup shrugged nonchalantly. "Well, Edinburgh's just an hour train ride from Glasgow, so I thought I'd come check it out."

That made no sense. He was meant to be in Berk. "What were you doing in Glasgow? What about university?"

He smiled easily as he leaned forward, his elbows on the bar, droplets of water dripping from his hair. "Remember how I told you they have a really good architecture school at the Glasgow School of Art? I transferred there, so I'll be studying there for the next two years, maybe three. You have to come see the campus. Charles Rennie Mackintosh designed the main building and it's really beautiful."

He was cut off by her lips crashing against his.

\* \* \*

><p>High five, Augustus Waters.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>It was her turn to visit him. He'd led her on a tour of Glasgow, pointing out all of the buildings he already loved, his face bright and happy and his hand warm around hers. The buildings were nice and all, but for her the best part was just being with him, watching him go on about the different styles and architects.<p>

And much to her delight she finally got to be that obnoxious girl kissing her boyfriend in the pub.

They took Toothless to the park in the afternoon, where they played fetch and Merida raced him over the grass, losing every time and laughing all the same. He leaped around her, then stood and rested his paws on her chest, and she scratched his ears and threatened to kidnap him back to Edinburgh. "And just wait 'til my dad meets you," she said, and Hiccup's heart soared.

Back at his flat she fished through her bag and held up a DVD case. "I brought a video," she said, grinning.

He shook his head adamantly. "No. Those guys on the cover have guns. I can tell what it's going to be like."

"You said you would!"

"I said I \_might\_."

"Oh, please, Hiccup," she pleaded. "Jensen shoots a crossbow in it." She pouted at him, lower lip stuck out as she offered the DVD with both hands. There was no way he could resist that, her lips and her big sad eyes, though he tried for as long as he could. Finally he sighed and took it and she grinned and clapped.

When the DVD was playing he settled down next to her on the couch. She pulled his arm around her shoulders and snuggled against him, then kissed his cheek lightly. "You won't regret it, I promise," she said.

He did, though. "Aw, come on," he complained a few minutes in. "This guy, with the stubble, and the dimples?"

"You have stubble," she said, nuzzling her cheek against his. His heart started to pound and his arm tightened around her, almost involuntarily. She lifted a hand and stroked his other cheek with light fingertips.

"No dimples, though." He turned his head and smiled to show her. Her hand left his cheek for the back of his neck, her fingers curling into his hair, pulling him closer.

"I don't mind," she breathed. She couldn't mind. Some guy with dimples, some other guy with a crossbow, actual Jeremy Renner, none of them were anything compared to him. His expression changed from a big goofy smile to a softer one as he brushed a curl from her face. Her eyes were wide, her lips parted slightly; he heard her breath hitch in a little gasp when he stroked his thumb over her lower lip. She dipped her head and kissed the pad of his thumb, warm and calloused and perfect.

Without meaning to he held his breath. Even though she was unmistakably real in his arms he sometimes still thought she'd disappear, like a dream. But she wasn't like any dream he'd ever had before—"his imagination wasn't good enough to come up with anything like her, not her long neck or her rose-gold eyelashes, her sense of humor or her fire, the fire that seemed to crackle along her curls when she was riled and that flowed out of her and into him, melting his bones, when she felt amorous. Like now, as she glanced up at him, looking almost shy but for the burning in her eyes. He brushed his lips against hers gently, and then again, and a third time, her eyes fluttering closed; then he dropped his forehead to hers and stared. She was gorgeous like this, her skin flushed, her lips puckered slightly. She opened her eyes to figure out why he'd stopped and met his gaze, nearly shivering at the open adoration she saw there.

"Well, if you're sure you don't mind—" he murmured. She smiled brilliantly and kissed him, lightly at first, teasingly, but his hand tangling in her hair soon encouraged her to kiss him in earnest.

They completely missed the part with the crossbow.

\* \* \*

><p>"See you next weekend," she said, leaning in close for a kiss.<p>

It wasn't a question, but he answered it like it had been, shrugging carelessly. "I'll be around."

"Ugh," she groaned as he smirked and pulled her close. "Remind me again why I'm in love with you?"

He would never, ever get tired of hearing her say that she loved him. "Your guess is as good as mine. You could definitely do better."

She shook her head solemnly. "No, I couldn't. No one could." She cuddled against him, burying her nose in the wool of his coat, feeling him kiss the top of her head. His heart beat strong and steady under her cheek and she closed her eyes.

From his spot by the bench Toothless woofed once and Hiccup looked up at the clock. "You'd better go," he said quietly, arms still tight around her. One day he just wouldn't say it and she wouldn't get on the train. She'd stay another night. Or maybe one day he'd pull her onto a train going who knew where and they'd ride until the tracks ran out, just to see what was out there.

"Damn." It was the same every time: she told herself they'd have a proper goodbye in private to spare everyone else at the station having to see their obnoxious displays of affection, and every time she had to tear herself from his arms and give him one more kiss that would make a priest blush. How was she supposed to help herself when he stood there, smiling at her, nose pink with the late autumn chill, the cleverest, kindest, wittiest, loveliest man in two countries, and him somehow in love with her?

She sighed and picked up her bag. "Bye, Toothless," she said from the door, and his tail thumped against the pavement. "Bye, you."

Letting her go wasn't the hardest thing he'd ever done, but it was the hardest part of every week. "Call me when you get there." He bit his lip and took a step closer to the train, his face pink all over as he said, "Love you, Merida."

Her face lit up, the way it did every time he'd said it so far. It was hard to believe that anything he said could make a person look so happy. His own heart swelled as her eyes went intense and she swore, "I love you, too."

The doors finally slid shut between them and he watched the train pull away, heading east. When it was gone he picked up Toothless' lead for the walk back to their building. They hadn't even made it to the street outside the station before his phone buzzed in his pocket.

\_I hope you're saving your money for the summer. I've got big plans for us xx \_

Next weekend, next summer, it couldn't come soon enough.

\_Can't wait. Xxxx\_

End  
file.